●谷川 流（たにがわ ながる）
兵庫県在住。2003年、第8回スニーカー大賞〈大賞〉を『涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱』で受賞し、デビューを果たす。また、電撃文庫より『学校を出よう！』『電撃!! イージス5』『絶望系閉じられた世界』の著作がある。趣味はバイクと麻雀。人生三寒四温中。今一番欲しいものは、無限の収容空間を持つ本棚と名状しがたき戦慄。

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The Intrigues of Suzumiya Haruhi

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Prologue

Suzumiya Haruhi has become very pensive lately.

Even though she is often melancholic and sometimes easily agitated, she is actually very sociable. Even so, she's been surprisingly tranquil these past couple days. This quietness from who-knows-where even scares people like me.

1 'Photograph' created by exposing a photographic plate to an electric field instead of light. The electrical properties of the subject being photographed generates a unique electrical field around it, creating an "aura" around it.

Of course, it isn't like her to stay quiet, and it definitely isn't a change of heart. Haruhi never doubts herself. Even if her personality has a slight or subtle change, she will never question herself. Anyway, if such a change were to happen, I would be put in a troublesome situation. So at this moment in time, I wouldn't bother to try and correct her. How should I put this… there's a type of quietness that's like a continuously radiating kirlian[1] photograph in which the light has gone from burning red to a duller orange which is subtly surrounding her.

Of all the people in the class only one, at most two will be able to realize that she is not quite the same as usual. Of these two, one is me.

Ever since I entered high school, she has always been sitting behind me and we meet after school every day. So, I can say without exaggerating that if anyone has noticed anything it would have to be me. But even though I say she's calm now, that bright flare can still give the all-knowing a run for their money. As soon as it bursts forth, the energy that will not stop until it succeeds will show its true colors.

Note that while she only got second at the event the school organized at the end of last month, Haruhi got first in the marathon held at the school at the beginning of this month. By the way, the winner of the first event was none other than Nagato Yuki, who also got second in the marathon. In a nutshell, the leaders of the SOS Brigade and the literature Club are both amazing and fit to be grouped with the Warlords in the past. And yet again, the school was left to rack its brains and try and figure out what the Brigade was doing. One such student who wondered this was me, a member.

If I know only one thing, it's that once Haruhi displays that kind of expression and spirit, I can be sure that she's planning something. And at the moment she has thought it through, her face will transform back to its enchanting, smiling form.

Oddly, I don't actually remember when I discovered this. When was it? I tried flipping through the history book in my mind, searching through for the record that displayed her quiet side gradually disappearing.

A calm moment is the accurate, unmistakable prediction of a giant tsunami. It has always been like that.

So……

It is now the beginning of February, the cold winter is nearing its end.

New Years has come and gone, and we left the troublesome old year behind almost a month ago. If time seems to have flown by, it's probably because you've kept yourself busy doing a lot of New Years related things during that first month.

Here, I'm hoping that time will reverse. I have no clue what Haruhi is planning, since I was busy coming to terms with my own situation first. Starting to reminisce about the past year in February is a bit early, but since what I have to say is not unsayable, I might as well tell it enthusiastically and completely.

At that time, I only had one motto: Finish the unfinished, one by one. As fast as possible.

When I made up my mind, it was when we were still on the winter trip. It took quite a bit of time before I set it in motion.

This is the story that starts January the second at the train station we always pass on normal days.

……

……

…

The vacation that had us fighting through a snowstorm and imprisoned in a mysterious mansion on the mountain finally ended on the second day of the new year. The SOS Brigade group that set out for the winter trip to that mountain villa finally returned home.

"Whew, I'm back."

Haruhi said hello to our little town, then turned to face the sunset, closing one eye.

"I can finally be comfortable. Even though the snow mountain wasn't too bad, the air you're used to is the best, although it is a bit stale."

Arakawa the butler, Mori the maid and the Tamaru brothers were all long gone, since they don't go this way to get home. So, the only ones claiming the baggage at the train station in front of our hometown are the tireless and extremely healthy Haruhi and Tsuruya-san, Asahina-san, who my sister was clinging to, unwilling to separate, the forever impassive Nagato, the exhausted Koizumi, the extremely weary me and the cargo, Shamisen. Ha, that should be enough, I guess.

"Dismissed for today."

Haruhi gave the appearance that she'd had lots of fun.

“Everyone can get some rest. Tomorrow will be the first time this year we visit the temples and shrines nearby, meet here at nine. Oh, Tsuruya-san, do you have any plans?”

The energetic vigor that’s already making plans for the next day after the vacation ended is very enviable. The problem is, my body, representing that of a normal human’s, doesn’t have a perpetual motion machine built into it. But Tsuruya-san, the person whose vitality can somehow keep up with Haruhi’s, said,

“Sorry everyone, I have to go to Switzerland tomorrow. I’ll bring some souvenirs back. Please, take this change and donate it!”

After saying this, she dug into her pockets and showed her clinking and clanging change to Asahina-san.

“This is New Year’s money!”

She said, giving all her change to my sister.

“See you next semester~”

She waved, leaving the train station with a bright, smiling face. Her posture was relaxed and cheerful. How was this girl raised? For future reference, I want to visit her parents and see what they say.

Haruhi kept waving until we lost sight of her around the corner of those apartments.

“Then, let’s go home. Everyone be careful on the road. It’s still the winter trip until you get home.”

If anything were to happen on the way home, Koizumi and I physically wouldn’t be able to take it anymore. Nothing weird should show up on the way home from the station, anyway.

I glanced at Nagato. Her abnormality inside the mysterious hotel on the mountain had vanished into thin air; she was now back to her emotionless, impossible-to-read state. As I thought this, her eyes moved and met mine. She nodded her head slightly; that wasn’t just an illusion, I think.

I looked over at Asahina-san. She had been relaxed and laid-back during the trip. The carefree-ness had become nervousness while in the (Hall of Snow Mountain Syndrome), but upon reflection, this was for the best. Now is when she really made an entrance. I stared at her, full of affection, but sadly, she didn’t notice my look at all and continued talking with my sister as if they were the same age.

“Well, see you tomorrow! Don’t be late. Oh, and don’t lose your pochibukuro, there’ll be stalls everywhere tomorrow.”

After Haruhi said that, I took hold of my sister's hand, held onto the box Shamisen was in, said farewell to Haruhi and Asahina-san and got on the public bus.

"See you later, Mikuru-chan!"

While I was pulling my struggling sister to her seat, I saw Asahina-san keep looking over and waving to my sister. Sorry, but I don't really feel like waving now. Well, if it were Haruhi or Koizumi, I would definitely shout goodbye.

So, as soon as I got home and liberated myself from Shamisen and my sister, after a few minutes, I called two particular brigade members I had just left at the stop.

Why?

Because I wanted to finish what I regret leaving incomplete as soon as possible.

2 Fukuwari and Sugoroku are the games the group played while on the trip to Snow Mountain in the story Where did the cat go?

And since it was because I was lazy that this awkward situation occurred, I'm very sorry, so I want to teach the old, lazy me a lesson. We should go to the me from a while before the trip. That time at the mysterious mansion on the mountain, it was because Nagato and Koizumi were bright that they managed to keep the worst-case scenario from occurring. But no one can guarantee that something like that will never happen again. Actually, I think that this had to happen someday. The fun at the mountain villa was delayed because of this problem, and the surroundings even disappeared along with the members. There was enough time afterwards at Tsuruya-san's resort while we played Fukuwarai and Sugoroku[2] for me to make a decision.

I have to go. I have to return to that time-space with Nagato and Asahina-san.

Yes, back to the dawn of December the eighteenth…

There's no time to rest off the weariness. First, I phoned Asahina-san, and since we had just separated, she was quite surprised.

"What's the matter, Kyon-kun?"

"There's a place I want to go with you. Today, preferably."

"Eh……? Where?"

"December the eighteenth of last year."

She was both shocked and puzzled.

"Ehhh……? Wha- What's happening?"

“Please take me and Nagato into the past, two weeks ago, to be precise. Then we can work together to try and reverse time.”

“Tha-, me send…… no, that device cannot be used when I feel like it. It requires lots of consideration and authorization by many other people.”

I bet that authorization will be easy to get. The vision floating in my mind’s eye is of Mikuru (Big) winking at me, even blowing me a kiss.

“Asahina-san, contact your boss or somebody like that right now. Explain it to them, and say that I want to take you and Nagato back to the dawn of December the eighteenth.”

I guess since I was brimming with confidence, Asahina-san’s sighs that occasionally leaked through the phone became silent.

“Wait, wait a minute.”

Of course I’ll wait. I’ve always wondered how you communicate with the future, but all I’m hearing is Asahina-san’s quiet breathing. This background music didn’t last ten seconds, and was quickly replaced by a confused voice.

“I don’t believe it……”

“It’s been authorized. Bu-Why……? It was so easy……”

That’s because the future is now resting on my shoulders — but I didn’t say that. How should I say this, I don’t want to talk for much longer on the phone.

“Let’s meet in front of Nagato’s apartment. Can you make it in 30 minutes?”

“Uhh, wait. Give me an hour. I want to double-check. Oh, and, we should just meet in front of Nagato-san’s apartment, there’s no need to go in.”

I happily agreed and hung up the phone. After thinking of Asahina-san’s cute and shocked face for a while, I set my face and reined in my feelings. In the time before departure, nothing that would make me laugh appeared. That guy should understand me best.

And another person, who will know what I’m up to even if I don’t tell her. But I should make sure. I picked up the phone again.

An hour later……

I came too early. I was so happy, I rode my bike as fast as I could. I stood in front of the luxurious apartment, almost freezing to death. 15 minutes later, a cheerful person ran up to me. It looked like she didn’t have time to change, and didn’t think of changing either. She was still wearing the clothes she was wearing when we came back from our trip. Actually, I was too.

“Kyon-kun.”

Asahina-san looked at me full of wonder.

“I still don’t get it. Why did your request go through so quickly? Furthermore, my boss even commanded me to take Nagato-san too, it has to be the three of us…… and when I asked him what the outcome would be, he only said that it was top-secret. And…… he even said I had to follow your orders. Why?”

“I’ll tell you in Nagato’s room.”

As I said this, I entered Nagato’s room number into the machine by the door and rang the doorbell. There was a response immediately.

“……”

“It’s me.”

“Enter.”

The door opened, I walked in. Ah, I can’t forget Asahina-san, she’s still baffled. After I waved to her, she seemed to wake up and hurried to catch up with me. Every single time we come here, she’s scared. It’s almost like it’s her habit now. In the elevator, Asahina-san was turning over and thinking about many questions. She looked quite nervous, but also puzzled.

That expression didn’t change, even after Nagato opened the door and ushered us in.

Nagato looked like she not only had time, but was very composed about everything too. She was in her apartment, but had already changed into that familiar sailor uniform. Reflecting, I feel that this appearance was especially comforting. I think this, not because I secretly have a sailor fetish, but because this person could fully understand the feeling of serenity in my heart.

That time, when I saw a short-haired person wearing a sailor uniform holding a knife, as I was losing consciousness.

If Nagato were to wear something else, I would probably feel very uncomfortable. I know I would still recognize her, but this sailor uniform has nearly become her trademark.

“……”

Without speaking, Nagato pointed to the room, suggesting that we should sit down. Then she walked to the kitchen to make some tea.

So, I used this time to outline the basic details for Asahina-san.

“I don’t believe it……”

Asahina-san's eyes were wide as plates as she muttered.

"What history was changed, how can it be, I didn't feel a thing……"

That's not a surprise. No matter how I look at it, the only one with a clear memory of those three days is me. That me could not have done anything if it weren't for Nagato's hints and amazing ability to act.

"A worldwide time-space change and direct interference with the future…… these things coincidentally happened at the same time."

Asahina-san's voice trembled, her gaze drifting away. The table now had three cups of tea. It was tea Nagato had steeped for us, and she cut in on my explanations to Asahina-san once in a while.

"Really."

Asahina-san was very startled by these comments, and her tea was untouched, it's probably cold already.

"……"

Nagato expressionlessly stared at Asahina-san, then shifted her unreadable gaze onto me, and then turned back to Asahina-san.

I think I know what Nagato wants to say. I had told Asahina-san that it was because Nagato had set things in motion, so the world changed on December the eighteenth. It was lucky that the Emergency Escape Program had worked, and I had returned to the Tanabata four years ago. But this resulted in Asakura Ryoko attempting to assassinate me, fortunately a failed attempt. Before fainting, I saw myself, Nagato and Asahina-san, seemingly from the future, restore the world to its original state. Only saying this, she might not understand what the hell is going on, so Nagato wants to add some footnotes.

Considering this wasn't all the information. The Tanabata four years ago also had an Asahina-san (Big) waiting for us. I still hadn't told her this, since I don't know if telling her would be good or bad. The Asahina-san now doesn't know anything. In other words, Asahina-san (Big) is hiding something from her.

This Asahina-san seems to be communicating with the future on a regular basis, so if it were important, someone, even if it wasn't Asahina-san (Big), maybe her boss or someone even higher up, someone would probably tell her. Hey, I don't know how time travelers communicate.

But I can mostly tell what happened. "When I asked him what the outcome is, he only said that it was a secret." were her words exactly.

Asahina-san probably doesn't know anything, because no one is telling her.

I don't know the reasons for this, but if I think about it, it seems about right. As a time traveler, she's kind of unprepared — that's what I've thought before. Almost falling into an endless August, the mysterious mansion…… and if Asahina-san had given advice from the future before this kind of event, it would have been avoidable, but she didn't. Why?

Nod. I see.

If Asahina-san (Big) doesn't know anything, it would be too weird, because she, in the past — Asahina-san now — has already done these things. So, if these events and adventures were avoided, her future history would change. So it is required that, no matter what, we have to go through these things.

This is all my theory, and the result is that we will all end up helpless to change anything, like Nagato.

But since it's like this, isn't Asahina-san quite pitiable? Every time something happens, she'll always be scared to death. The number of times she's been shocked may even surpass the number of times I, a person from this time, have been startled. Moreover, Asahina-san's reasons for coming to the present are very suspicious. If it was only Haruhi that needed to be under surveillance, an anti-theft video camera could do the job.

There has to be a real reason. Asahina-san herself does not know. But, the her a little while into the future does seem to know……

Lost in thought, I heard a cold, crisp voice.

"I want you to do something for me."

Since it's Nagato, I would do almost anything that she asks.

"Please don't say anything to the me in the time we are visiting."

Any talk at all? Do "Um" and "Ah" count too?

"If it's possible."

Nagato's normally expressionless eyes showed her thoughts, for once. Her black pupils showed that this was really a passionate wish. For me to reject this request, it would be akin to trying to catch the moon in the lake.

"Got it. Since you said it like this, I'll find a way."

The head that always has short hair nodded, slightly.

Nagato, whose instructions were used to iron out the details of time and space, and Asahina-san, who was the faithful executor, made up this team of Aliens and Time Travelers. No matter how

big Koizumi's Agency is, they have no chance of winning. Except I'm not sure if they even plan on fighting.

Nagato, Asahina-san and I went to the entrance to put on our shoes. In that cramped space, we crowded and squeezed together. Last month, when I went with Asahina-san (Big), I had forgotten my shoes. That lesson reappeared clearly before me now. Her high heels were in the exact same place they were four years ago, obviously the work of Nagato. It's not like I can return them to this Asahina-san, so I guess I'll just ignore them.

"Um, December the eighteenth… what time?"

Nagato's answer was exact to the second; Asahina-san nodded her head.

"We're going now. Kyon-kun, close your eyes. "

And — —

Time moved. That very familiar dizzy feeling that makes me want to puke. Even though my eyes are closed, it feels like something is flashing. It's comparable to staring at the sky and ascending, along with that unpleasant feeling of rising fast and losing track of what's up and what's down. Just like riding on an out-of-control roller coaster and being thrown around ten times, losing focus and feeling very weird, I was almost at my limit…

My soles finally landed on the ground again. The gravity pulling me down feels so comfortable.

"We're here."

Nagato said softly.

I opened my eyes gingerly, and was startled.

I found myself standing in front of the school gates.

I quickly tried to remember what happened before. On Tanabata four years ago, I came through time on the direction of the Nagato still in "Standby Mode". Coming back to the eighteenth with Asahina-san, I had gazed at the black world Nagato had created and walked under a street light……

……and we had landed in the middle of all that.

That "Me", changing himself as the world changed, was saying something to a Nagato with glasses on. I can even see the shadow of Asahina-san wearing my jacket. This isn't too good, because no matter how you look at it, this is just way too close.

"Don't worry."

Our Nagato said in monotone.

“They can’t see us. A soundproof barrier has been set up.”

That means, to “Me”, Asahina-san and Nagato (with glasses), we’re just soundless, transparent people. This doesn’t need clarification from Nagato, because she’s here with us. Pity.

Asahina-san was blinking non-stop.

“Um…… who’s that girl? It’s an adult, why is she here?”

From here, they’re only silhouettes. As expected, Asahina-san doesn’t get it. If she could imagine that her future self would appear here, it would be too unnerving. As I was contemplating whether or not to tell her, something happened that made that thought disappear like dust in the wind. Even though I knew it was coming, it still gave me goose bumps watching it as a spectator.

Suddenly, someone appeared from the shadows. It passed softly by us and by the time I realized that it was Asakura Ryoko, she was already running, no, charging at “us”. Her knife was at her waist as she charged us in a hostile fashion.

Asahina-san (Big) yelled something, but it was too late, “I” had been stabbed, just like I remember.

“Ohh.”

That looked painful. I didn’t notice it before, but when Asakura is waving that knife around, she’s very detestable. Full of bloodlust, she stuck the knife into “my” body without hesitation. Luckily, Asakura Ryoko can only be convicted of attempted murder.

“I” fell.

“Eh…… Oh! Kyon-kun!”

Asahina-san started yelling too, and she started to run to “Me”. “Ah……!” as she immediately ran into the invisible wall, and she stopped, looking on miserably. I think she’s forgotten I’m right beside her in the heat of the moment. Her eyes only saw “Me”, and I still don’t know if I should be pleased or jealous.

“Nagato-san!”

Looking at Asahina-san, Nagato bobbed her head.

“The barrier’s dissolved…… It ends now.”

Asahina-san ran over, Nagato also started working. Faster than the night wind, she grabbed Asakura's knife right away. Asakura's yell rang out, a mixture of hate and fright. I also ran towards the old me. Oh, great, now "I" look horrible.

Asahina-san was crying while she held "Me" in her arms. Since she's worried about me, I'm really happy. But hanging there, I wouldn't mind if I died.

She tearfully cried for "Me" as if her life depended on it, completely ignoring everyone else. I really want to thank her.

Painfully, Asahina-san (Big) moved her gaze from the ground up and stared at me.

"You're here."

But I'm a bit late, not as in time late, but mood-wise.

"……Hey……"

This sound was Nagato from my memory. The someone running around that was hurting my heart. The Nagato with glasses had fallen down, and was sitting there with a look of alarm on her face. Those dark eyes' gaze moved from the fallen "Me" to Asakura, then to the person wearing the same sailor uniform as her, then onto me.

"Wh…… y……"

I have an agreement with my Nagato. So, I cannot talk to this other Nagato, the one that just finished changing the world. There is only one thing I have to say or do.

Picking up the gun that Nagato had made three years ago, I looked at "Me". To say what I heard before, I opened my mouth and said what I remembered. This should work, because as long as it mostly fits, a little bit of difference is allowed. That "Me" completely closed his almost-closed eyes, falling to one side. This fainting scene was very exciting, it looked like "I" died. But if no one stops the blood, "I" would really die.

Then, from now on, it's all up to us. Even I don't know what will happen after.

The first thing I see is my Nagato stopping Asakura.

"……"

The knife Nagato was holding onto glowed as it turned to dust. Asakura wanted to run away but couldn't move, as if her feet were glued to the ground. Nagato was speaking very fast.

"Wh, Why? You……"

Asakura's body was also shining now.

“Isn’t this what you wanted…… Today too…… Why……”

The unmoving Asakura asked one last question, and then disintegrated like a knife just cut her into pieces. At the same time,

“Ah?……”

Asahina-san (Small) toppled over, looking like she was bending over my body. The softly closed eyes and the slightly open mouth said she was asleep.

Asahina-san’s (Big) hand gently caresses the dead-tired senpai’s neck.

“I put her to sleep.”

The adult Asahina-san stroked her young self’s hair sadly.

“I can’t let her know I’m here. I had to do this.”

Asahina-san sleeps very cutely, using “my” hand as a pillow.

“Don’t tell her about me.”

This sleeping face is the same as the one from Tanabata three years ago, as the one on the bench in the park, the reason is exactly the same too, Asahina-san (Big) doesn’t want the her from the past see what she looks like. The back is fine, but if she walks closer, Asahina-san is not allowed to see Asahina-san (Big).

I gazed at the unconscious Asahina-san and at “Me”.

“……”

My Nagato knelt and leaned over, putting her hand to the abdomen of the “Me” that got stabbed. It’s a good thing she did. Anyway, the blood stopped, and “my” pale face finally looked like a normal human’s. So, the person who healed me was her.

Nagato casually stood up and, without wiping the blood off her finger, reached her hand out and said,

“Lend it to me.”

I didn’t say anything, and just gave her the gun. I haven’t held it in a long time, and was glad to give it up. If anything happens, this can be used as a threat I suppose. But no matter what, I won’t shoot any Nagato with it.

The gun-wielding Nagato points the gun at the Nagato with glasses sitting on the ground, who had been timid all along. She nonchalantly cocks and fires it.

Nagato (with glasses) started shining as she slowly stood up. That stick-like posture was the posture of the Nagato I was familiar with. Completely different from when she gave me an application form, or when she awkwardly pulled on my sleeve while crying, different from that shy, slightly smiling person.

Like she was proving it to me, that Nagato took off her glasses and, after staring at me, locked her cold gaze onto the other her and said,

“Request synchronization.”

The two Nagatos stared at each other. Counting this time, I have already seen “Me” several times before. Both Asahina-sans have also been around each other many times. But, this is the first time there has been more than one Nagato at a time. It makes me feel odd. Quite a magnificent sight.

“Request synchronization.”

The Nagato that was shot repeated, the Nagato that shot immediately replied.

“Denied.”

Even I found this odd, let alone the Nagato holding glasses in her hand. Her eyebrows may have moved.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

I’m astonished. Completely flabbergasted. Has anything this clear ever come out of Nagato’s mouth before? This isn’t an excuse. This explicit denial proves she has emotions, no doubt about it.

“……”

The other Nagato, seemingly lost in thought, quieted.

“……”

She’s as silent as before, as the night wind blows her hair around.

I gently said to the Nagato from the past,

“Go change the world back to its former state.”

“Understood.”

That Nagato nodded, and said, in a slightly hesitating voice that only I could understand,

“Unable to sense the existence of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity.”

“It’s not here.”

My Nagato faintly said,

“I am still connected to the time and space I am from, let me do the second adjustment. ”

“Understood.” Said the Nagato from the past.

“After the transformation,”

My Nagato said,

“You can move according to your own wishes.”

The Nagato that was just reverted looks at me, her head tilted. Unperceivable data appears in that expression and gaze, but I can read it, no one is more clear than I as to what Nagato wants to say.

This Nagato is that Nagato. The Nagato that appeared at the hospital that night. The one that said her own punishment was being debated and annoying the shit out of me.

I also understand why the Nagato from the future has rejected synchronization. Nagato doesn’t want that her to tell this her what she has to do.

Why? — Why ask why, that’s something that’s not obvious to see.

Thank you. — That time I heard Nagato say this as the answer.

“Kyon-kun?”

Asahina-san spoke cautiously to the still standing me.

“This child…… Can you take care of her?”

She started to pick up the heavy-looking, peacefully-sleeping Asahina-san (Small). I immediately went to help, and, following her directions, piggy-backed the slender Asahina-san like before. She’s even as soft and warm as in my memory.

“A large-scale time-quake will be happening shortly,”

Asahina-san (Big) said, hugging her arms, her very serious face showing sharp anxiety.

“Compared with the one Nagato-san did just now, this one is even more complicated and significant. Opening your eyes, even if you wanted to, would be extremely hard.”

Since it’s you that’s saying this, of course I believe you, but what difference does this make?

“The first change was only meant to start the process. In this one, we need to make time turn back to its original flow. Think for a second about where you woke up.”

The evening of December the eighteenth, I went into the hospital where I later woke up.

“Yes. So, we must make this turn into that.”

Barefoot, with my jacket over her shoulder, Asahina-san (Big) slowly and quietly walked over.

One of Asahina-san’s (Big) hands went to Asahina-san’s (Small) shoulder as she turned her head around and looked at Nagato. The Nagato that came here with me walked over to join us. There was still someone remaining like they originally were; the fallen “Me” was still lying there.

Asahina-san (Big) reached out and grabbed Nagato with her free hand.

“It’s up to you, Nagato-san.”

Nagato lightly nodded her head, then stared at herself, as if they were never going to meet again. The other Nagato didn’t say a word. It might have been my imagination, but she looked very lonely. No worries. I still remember what I said then. That “Me” right there will talk to you soon enough. That punk will say this, for certain, so come visit with a clear conscience. Don’t forget to call your boss a ‘bastard’ for me.

“Close your eyes, Kyon-kun,”

Asahina-san (Big) said softly,

“Don’t get time-sick.”

I followed her advice, closing my eyes tightly.

The next moment, I feel the world tremble.

“Uwah — —”

Falling heads over heels and revolving in a no-gravity zone is something I have experienced many times before. Even though I think I’m used to these sensations, this time is vastly different from all the other times. If all the other times were like riding a roller-coaster in an amusement park, this is a noisy, anarchic space shuttle I’m randomly flying about in without a seat belt. But, since my body has no mass, it is actually not being twirled around. This is just dizziness. Despite the fact that I want to see what the outside looks like, as soon as I open my eyes, it’s really like

being dead drunk, very scary. The only movie I get to see is the random bits of light that came through my eyelids, lighting up the dark. The warmth of Asahina-san (Small) on my back and the feeling of Asahina-san's (Big) hand on my shoulder are both very comforting.

— — I feel a waning light stabbing at my closed eyes.

Because I can't resist the desire to look, I open my eyes, and see where the red light is, in reality, coming from. Revolving red lights are something only emergency vehicles have.

What……?

An ambulance stood directly in front of North High's gates. Students who like action looked on from a distance while emergency personnel lifted someone onto a stretcher. There were two people following this stretcher at its high speed, two girls in fact, and I will never forget their names my entire life. Haruhi's pale face looked frightened, Asahina-san was crying and very sad, running after the stretcher. Shortly after, an unsmiling Koizumi chased after them.

The stretcher was immediately put into the ambulance, and Haruhi, after exchanging a few words with the personnel, got in too. The red lights started flashing again, and the ambulance began to move. Koizumi, standing beside Asahina-san who was covering her eyes, looked very serious as he talked on his cell phone. Nagato wasn't there, but that was obvious.

My dizziness still hadn't gone away. To tell the truth, I wasn't even sure where my body was at the moment.

Some part of my body felt Asahina-san (Big) let out a huge sigh.

"Kyon-kun, now we'll return to the original time."

The movie I was watching gradually disappeared. Has the service been cut? I'll give you something to see. Like during my three-day long memory loss, it's a brigade leader's responsibility to worry about the members, that's the way it is, Haruhi.

The dizziness started again, I really want to take some pills. Next time, I must prepare some beforehand.

"Aim at the time you came from. Follow that me. It will take her a while to wake up…… Fufu, Maybe I'll let you kiss me."

And with that joke, I felt Asahina-san (Big) gradually fade away.

And — —

When I open my eyes, I'm standing in Nagato's living room with Asahina-san on my back.

Nagato is standing facing me.

“Sixty-two seconds have passed since we departed.”

Lifting her head to look at me, she said,

“We’re back.”

Back to our own time and world.

I sighed and put Asahina-san down off my shoulders. She’s really the best nominee for a ‘Make-people-want-to-kiss-your-sleeping-face’ contest. The “Me” that believes everything Asahina-san said is very impure. If this wasn’t Nagato’s room, or she wasn’t staring at me like she’s investigating me, it’s possible I might throw away feelings of shame. No, I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t.

Picking up the teacup on the table, I downed it in one gulp. Even though when we left the tea was already cool, this tasted great. It’s kind of like drinking tea after taking a bath. It can also be compared to Asahina-san’s tea.

‘’Sigh’’ “Oh man…”

Finally, I’ve finished everything from last year that needed sorting out. There shouldn’t be anything we haven’t finished. With the chapter on the world changing closed at last, the winter trip that crossed into this year is definitely finished, the only thing left is going to the temples and shrines for the first time this year. Meh, Haruhi will come up with something new in a little bit. Before that happens, these days should be quite quiet.

By the way, the angel-like time traveler is still not awake. I don’t know what kind of magic was used on her, but she looks just like Shamisen in a warm room after being fed. Being put into this sleep that looks very happy, it’s actually somewhat pitiable. I asked Nagato to put bedding on the ground, and placed Asahina-san down to sleep on it, putting a wool blanket and a quilt on top.

“Nagato, before Asahina-san wakes up, please take care of her.”

Nagato regarded the sleeping visitor, then shot a look at me and nodded her head.

Although I woke up ready for action, I am now actually really tired. The accumulated tiredness from the vacation and the time travel, if not taken care of with a bath and bed, will prevent me from getting up tomorrow at nine. My very limited reserves are slowly disappearing, like an ordinary miracle. I want that to stop. You could say what five people do in a month is small in comparison with what I’ve gone through.

Not unlike the Tanabata when I started being Mr. Sleep-for-Three-Years, I could let her put a blanket on me with Asahina-san. But even though I have confidence that I will fall asleep once I lie down, I can’t help but think that nobody would wish for that to happen.

A time traveler occasionally sleeping at an alien’s house, that’s not too bad.

“See you tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

Using her very calming gaze, Nagato expressionlessly stared at me. Her two serene pupils under her bangs stared fixedly at me.

“Thanks for your work today. Sorry I made you go through all that.”

Same with Asahina-san. The person who did the most work would be this Nagato and the Nagato that was there at the Tanabata four years ago.

“No problem.”

Her expression unchanged,

“This all started because of me.”

I stared at the alien until the door closed tightly. Earlier, I had wondered whether a smile would show up on her face, regrettably not — or very comforting, since the delicate, fair face is impassive as usual. But I thought there was something different from the past, thank my skilled eyes for noticing that.

Coming out of the apartment, I slowly rode my bike home, and fell asleep as soon as I lay on my bed after getting there.

I feel that if you fall asleep when you’re really tired, you will have a whole lot of weird, happy dreams. Thirty seconds after I woke up, I forgot everything about the dream, but the lingering mood told me everything I needed to know.

A time traveler and an alien peacefully steeping tea together will leave this kind of a mood.

So, just like putting Asahina-san down off my shoulders, I threw off all worries and lived calmly for a month.

But there was still a problem.

After seeing that extremely cute face, this problem had slipped my mind; but even though she fell asleep, Asahina-san wouldn’t forget what Nagato and I, along with Asahina-san (Big) went through on December the eighteenth. From her point of view, she had just heard from me that time and space had been changed and had not known whether to believe it or not. After going back in time to see the horrid scene in which “I” got stabbed, she got put to sleep. After she woke up, did she want to go back? — That’s the problem.

From my point of view, she'd already completed her mission very well, since what she did only she could do. Except Asahina-san didn't see it like that. Now that I think about it, not long after the end of the vacation, Asahina-san became very absent-minded and lost in thought.

This and that Sunday Asahina-san who called me out melancholically are connected in some way. She even saved a kid wearing glasses from an auto accident that day. Actually, Asahina-san's (Big) secrecy has an interesting implication. Whoever makes Asahina-san cry deserves to be beat to a pulp; this is indisputable. After reflecting for a while, I wondered how many times I've made Asahina-san cry? Next time I go to a boxing practice ring with Haruhi, I'll practice some boxing. I can even enjoy the sensation of hitting people and being hit.

To cut a long story short, it's a good thing that Sunday when two people went to buy tea happened. It got me thinking about the future of the SOS Brigade, and it successfully lifted Asahina-san's depression. To tell you the truth, I don't know what she perceived, but we seem to have a mutual understanding. There's no point explaining it in detail, especially not to Asahina-san now.

I never mention John Smith in front of Haruhi. This is somewhat like me not telling Asahina-san about the adult Asahina-san; it has a similar meaning. This is the emergency trump card.

If the time comes — —

Well, I don't want that time to come.

…

……

……

And as February began, the topic started to show up again.

As soon as the new year arrived, the atmosphere around the school changed. For example, you will almost never see a third-year anymore. Around this time, they are all getting prepared for tests and whatnot, maybe this is the reason, but even the mood in homeroom was much more tense. As I think back to last year, it obviously does affect me. If the third-years don't work attentively, and the marks do not surpass the competitive schools in the district, the principal will fretfully request everyone to enroll in extra courses or sacrifice the school cultural festival for mock tests and the like. And since I have to do this after two years, it's very depressing.

Talking about tests, the tests that determine your class number are about to begin. Our school has two of them. Actually, class nine, which Koizumi's in, is Math/Physics. I'm not sure whether he just has connections or is naturally smart, I'm still amazed he managed to transfer in. I sure don't take Math and Physics seriously enough to make them my principle courses.

Temporarily moving my thoughts from the future to the present hell, University admission tests. Why can't the quickly counting down senior days go by slower? I am purposely not looking at the calendar. Since I got back from December the eighteenth, I have been carefree and relaxed.

All in all, I can't think of a more dangerous job than fixing time and space. Since I completed it smoothly, just let me rest for a little while. Nagato is now exactly the same as before. Asahina-san's smiling face has finally come back. Haruhi is a bit unusual, but she'll be back to her noisy self in no time at all.

At this point, there shouldn't be any problems at all. I might as well say I don't want to think about it. But, in the club room, a selfish person just has to bring up trivial matters and deem it important all by himself. He is the only brigade member to be cast aside with Haruhi, the useless during a time-space change esper, Koizumi.

"There are two December the eighteenths you frequently visit, interesting."

After the incident at the mysterious mansion, Koizumi has enjoyed listening to the experiences I've had with time travel. Just like a smart little grandson wanting a story out of his grandparents, Koizumi has already asked and inquired many times before. He seems to really want to travel in time. I always feel like he envies me. I mean, on the way back from Tsuruya-san's, he was heartily asking "Can I go too?" and "I don't even care if I can't see the past me." and stuff like that. Needless to say, I completely ignore him.

I am embarrassed because of the Nagato thing, so even though everything is over, I still talk obscurely about it. Finally, I cannot deter Koizumi any longer and, not wishing to offend him too much, told him about the incident.

So, just as I had expected, he started to explain cheerfully.

"You see, this all started when Nagato-san changed the world on the dawn of December the eighteenth. In that world, I, Suzumiya-san and Asahina-san were all normal people. You spent three days there, then you went three years back in Nagato-san's Emergency Escape Program…… No, wait, four years now…… There you met the normal Nagato-san and went back once again to dawn on December the eighteenth."

Yes I know that. I've been there again recently, you know.

"Okay, think about this. Dawn of December the eighteenth. Let's label the time that Nagato-san changed the world as 'X'. When you went from Tanabata four years ago to 'X', that 'X' already wasn't the original 'X'."

What? That's impossible. There can't be more than one 'time' at a time.

"No, that's just the way our minds work. It's simple, really. If the world had not changed at 'X', Suzumiya-san wouldn't have disappeared and I wouldn't have become a normal person. If that were the case, you would have no reason to go back."

An ontological paradox. Yes, I know of those.

“But this world requires you to go back in time to fix it. If you didn’t go, the world would have continued on its wrong path. So you went back to the past, and righted the world. Otherwise this time would not exist.”

“Let’s draw a diagram. That might help.”

Ever since the snow mountain incident, Koizumi likes diagrams a lot. Picking up a whiteboard marker, he starts to trace a line down the whiteboard.

“Let’s say this line is the world going on its original course from the past to the future.”

The line stops in the middle of the board. He draws a circle on it and labels it ‘X’.

“This is the original time. Here, Nagato-san changed the world she was in and your memories of that world begin.

Koizumi begins drawing again. This time it isn’t a straight line. It’s a very rounded line curving to the right, making a circle leading back to the ‘X’ point. The diagram now looks like a budding leaf with half ripped off.

“This circle is the memory you have after the eighteenth. The Emergency Escape Program let you return to Tanabata four years ago, and from there you went to the eighteenth. If Nagato-san had been reverted right here, everything would have been fine, but it didn’t work out like that I guess.”

Because Asakura Ryoko was there. But, at that time, it wasn’t just Asakura who intervened. There was also a “Me” from the future, along with Nagato and Asahina-san (Small). We did everything in our power to revert the world to its former state. Now that I think about it, it took about a month.

“That’s it. Which means you saved yourself. That is —”

Koizumi’s pen started out from the ‘X’ point again, this time looping to the left,

“— this part. The history of this world now. In the memory of Suzumiya-san and myself, you fell down the stairs on the eighteenth and lost consciousness, not waking up until the twenty-first. This was also two months ago, when you set out to save yourself.”

Even after drawing the left loop, Koizumi didn’t stop the pen. He continued the line that ran through the ‘X’, only stopping when the line reached the bottom of the board. He put down the pen, took a half-step back, glanced at me and looked at the diagram intently.

It was just a sideways eight, looking remarkably like an infinity sign (∞), with a line down the middle. It’s very easy to understand like this. The point all the lines connect is the ‘X’ time.

I, who had always earnestly told myself I hated Math and Physics, was slowly beginning to understand what Koizumi wanted to say.

The right loop was the time from my memory. After a series of chaotic events, I managed to make it back to ‘X’ and was there when Nagato changed the world. I even got stabbed by Asakura.

The left loop was the time I missed. It was the time from when I lost consciousness after being stabbed up to when I woke up in the hospital. Those three days were this loop.

And both circles start from ‘X’……

“Meaning there are two ‘X’ times.”

Koizumi answered me simply.

“If the world before the change is ‘X’, then after the change — We can call it ‘X*’”.

Koizumi, who had put down the pen, looked at his graph and was very interested.

“Without an ‘X’, there would be no ‘X*’. So, the original ‘X’ did not disappear. We could say the two times are superposed. When becoming…… superimposed, it got covered up. The old data was overwritten with new data. The first ‘X’ ran for a while, but it and the changed world that stemmed from it were covered up by the ‘X*’, the second timeline. But it isn’t gone altogether, it’s still there.”

“I don’t get it.”

I pretended I didn’t understand, while suddenly remembering Asahina-san’s (Big) words.

Something about a larger and more complicated time quake occurring.

“It’s like looking at two separate overlapping circuits. The intersection looks like it’s a 2-D connection. If we add another dimension, that’s different. Even though in the world of horizontal and vertical lines they look like one place, they are at a different depth.”

I rub my temples, pondering what a time traveler would make of this. Or an alien, for the matter.

“There’s also another possibility I would like to share with you.”

I’m pretty sure I’ll have to listen to anything he says now anyway.

“The memory we have but you don’t have…… when you fell down the stairs on the eighteenth, to your awakening on the twenty-first, three days later, maybe it never existed.”

It doesn’t really matter if it did or not. Besides, I was just lying there the whole time.

“Yes, it’s just as you say. Do you remember what I said before? We cannot eliminate the possibility the world was created five minutes ago. Maybe you being lifted into an ambulance and out cold for three days never happened. You could also think, from when the world was changed on the eighteenth to when you woke up on the twenty-first, those moments don’t exist in time. If this were true, then Suzumiya-san’s and my own memories are made up and we’ve been made to believe them after everything was reconstructed on the evening of the twenty-first……”

I did say I would listen, but no matter how I looked at it, it was ridiculo — I can’t say that. It’s not completely impossible. The past had been re-written for a year back, and this was only three days.

“Change of topic. Suzumiya-san saw the reality of the shadow girl, she’s alert to it now.”

Who? The person who pushed me down the stairs?

“It was Nagato-san.”

That’s hilarious. At the time, wasn’t Nagato going down the stairs with you guys? Apparently, I was at the back.

“Yes. That’s what we all remember. Nagato-san didn’t push you directly. But she was the one that made up the story of you being knocked unconscious. And Suzumiya-san intuitively sensed that it was no accident. Of course she doesn’t really know it was Nagato-san. In reality, the perpetrator wasn’t at the scene of the crime. But Suzumiya-san doesn’t know that. What she does know is that for it to become like this, someone had to do something. So the culprit must be hiding nearby.”

Koizumi smiled that bright smile.

“That intuition sort of created the shadow girl. Of course, such a perpetrator does not exist. There is no mysterious shadow.”

You can’t be telling me Haruhi suspects Nagato purely based on intuition. After Nagato’s new world was fixed, she changed everyone’s memories at will. But I can believe that somehow, Haruhi has come to realize something was wrong, that there was somebody, somewhere, doing something.

“It’s a theory, what I came up with to answer your question.”

The enlivening rogue sat on the chair and suddenly extended his arms wide.

“In fact, I don’t understand how the timelines are created and paradoxes resolved. But then what is Asahina-san doing, coming here from the future? So now I have a question for you. If you could go into the past and steer history away from something awful, would you?”

I suddenly think of Asahina-san (Big) on the night of Tanabata. When Haruhi and Koizumi, who had went to a different school, Asahina-san of the Calligraphy Club and Nagato with glasses were assembled, I pressed the 'Enter' key on the keyboard, and the second time-quake happened right away. The "I" from the past sitting on the long bench in the park. The "I" that helped the middle-school Haruhi draw the pictures.

If I had ran up at the time, I wonder what would have happened. If I had told him everything that was going to happen, don't let Haruhi make that movie, don't give Nagato any trouble, etc, and gave him some advice.

I can only shrug my shoulders, because there's nothing else possible.

"Yeah, I don't know."

If I really had the chance to do so, I say do it before you think about it. I know the head will be hard to use, so just let the body do it. I always did that before, I'm anticipating doing it this time too.

"But, no matter what people say, you can't just go on time traveling trips, especially if it doesn't impact us."

That's too bad, I was going to take you with me this time.

Even if your eyes look like Shamisen's when he's hungry in the middle of the night, I don't care. Go beg Asahina-san; the adult one, that is. I have no clue where you have to go to find her. The only thing I can tell you is, remember to bring some medicine for the dizziness.

Koizumi, depressed, shook his head and started to play Shogi by himself. I continued reading my manga magazine like before, the club room was peaceful once again. I was just thinking, that's good, when……

"Sorry to make you wait!"

With that, the door is kicked open. The main character in the chaos enters, her sailor uniform skirt and hair blowing charmingly and freely in the wind. The master of this room, Haruhi, is holding a convenience store bag, her face smiling complacently.

"The stores in the neighborhood don't have these snacks, so I had to go down the hill to get these. Ahh! I'm freezing."

There was an electric stove in the corner of the room, so she quickly stretched out her hands to warm them up. After the Brigade Leader came Nagato and Asahina-san. Both were carrying the same type of things as Haruhi.

"……"

Nagato silently closed the door.

“Um, what should we do next?”

Asahina-san, confused, cocked her head. Haruhi zealously replied,

“Do I even need to tell you? Mikuru-chan, do you know what day today is? You couldn’t have bought all this without knowing, right?”

“February the third. But, what does……?”

“It’s the Spring Setsubun! Spring Setsubun!”

Haruhi pulled out a vacuum-packed food package out of the convenience store bag.

“That annoys me, Mikuru-chan. You didn’t do this when you were little? It’s Setsubun today, and if it’s Setsubun, you just naturally want to throw roasted soy beans and eat futomaki!”

Futomaki really is a local tradition. In a nutshell, she’s a brigade leader that rigidly follows the little traditional festivals of the four seasons. Now, the SOS Brigade isn’t the ‘Save our world by Overloading it with fun: Suzumiya Haruhi Brigade’ anymore, it’s the ‘Save the world by celebrating all Obscure festivals: Suzumiya Haruhi’s Brigade’. This is so not a lie.

“What’s this, a Bernoulli lemniscate?”

Right away, Haruhi noticed Koizumi’s drawing on the white board. She looked at the path I had traveled through time, her gaze like somebody stalking their own kid.

“It can’t be. What formula would draw this line?”

“I just drew it for fun.”

Calmly, Koizumi stood up and erased the path off the white board.

“I drew it to kill time, you don’t need to think too deeply about it.”

Awesome excuse.

“Oh, I see.”

Haruhi easily believed it, because that thing didn’t matter. She threw the bag to me. After flying through the air, the bag landed in my hands. It was a bag filled to the brim with roasted soy beans.

It’s Setsubun! Because it is Setsubun, we just have to scatter beans — is what Haruhi was thinking all through lunch break. At the time, Haruhi had loudly shouted,

“I kept thinking I was forgetting something. Yeah, It was Setsubun!”

Maybe she realized it after seeing Taniguchi’s lunch, sushi. As soon as Taniguchi opened his lunch box, he started to vent, “Oi, oi, what the hell is this? How come this is it?” angrily.

“They made it for you with good intentions, don’t be picky.” I replied. But deep inside me, I agreed with this kid, and I do not approve of whoever made such a lunch. At least wrap it up after cutting it, don’t let Haruhi see.

“Only worshipping foreign cultures isn’t good, you know. You have to respect your own tradition and enjoy the activities. It’s kind of a pity if you ignore them. Without it, half the fun will be gone. People who forget their roots are going down the wrong road!”

Quiet. Wait. Is it possible she thinks she’s traveling down the right road? In my opinion, you would even go backwards on a road a wild pig usually goes down.

“What are you talking about? I always set the king’s road as my goal. So, I do everything I can. Kyon, you even forgot today was Setsubun, right? That’s hard to forgive.”

I’m pretty sure you forgot too. No, as I was about to say this, HR ended, and Haruhi started preparing immediately. The only thing she actually needs is soy beans and futomaki. She could get it herself. Luckily, I was called by our homeroom teacher Okabe-sensei to run an errand. Koizumi was also the cleaning person of the day. So, Haruhi could only get Nagato and Asahina-san to go with her. After school, the three of them left. They finally got back now. That’s basically what happened.

We can just eat the futomaki facing the lucky direction of the year, but the soy beans have a specific function.

“So, where are we going to scatter the beans?”

I opened a bag and asked this while shoving beans toward my mouth. This would go well with some tea as a snack.

“If we do it in the clubroom, it would be really hard to clean up, it’s best if we don’t.”

“Anywhere’s fine.”

Haruhi turns her bright eyes and says,

“Oh, yeah! Dropping them off the highest balcony on the school into the courtyard is a good idea, right? The beans that drop onto the ground will become bird food, there’s no need to clean up.”

Continuing, Haruhi declared,

“We already have people suitable to be ‘lucky daughters’, so let’s do this on a grand scale.”

The leader of the SOS Brigade was staring at Asahina-san, who was intently reading the package, and Nagato, who was already sitting down in front of the table, reading her detective novel.

If there were a school contest to see who would be the best ‘lucky daughters’, the ones to win the grand prize and special mention would probably be these two. Putting that aside, this type of ‘scatter the beans and banish the demons’ event is right up their alley. Asahina-san could act it out; Nagato would do the actual banishing.

We trailed behind Asahina-san and the person dragging her, Haruhi, finally reaching the highest balcony. There, we followed instructions, and start to scatter beans. The scatterers are the three girls in the Brigade, this was an order too. Koizumi and I are just responsible for replenishing their supply of beans as they scatter them around. Following Haruhi’s instructions, oddly enough, we actually do this thing well.

When we first started, the students down there didn’t know what was going on, and ran around like a group of insects not wanting to die. But before a minute had passed, the guys had come back in twos and threes and started to fight for the beans Asahina-san and Nagato were throwing down just like it was for money. They generally avoided the beans that Haruhi and her strong arms were firing off, considering it was kind of like the beans were fired out of a gun. For this, they moved in unison, going left and right at the same time.

“Stand and fight!”

Haruhi said, lamenting.

“Hey, if we had dressed Mikuru-chan up in a shrine maiden costume, we could have used this to make some money. Even if we only asked for 100 yen each, we’d still make quite a large sum, right?”

If we had dressed her up in that costume, she would suddenly be very popular, but there’s nothing to worry about. Cosplay is limited to the clubroom only.

“Whew, Fuku wa uchi — Umm, Yeah. Fuku wa uchi — ”

I gazed at the frantically throwing Asahina-san and the completely silent Nagato tossing beans off the balcony. Of course, a picture of them in shrine maiden costumes went through my head, and I replied to Haruhi,

“500 yen each, I say.”

Anyway, they were yelling ‘Fuku wa uchi’ (Luck in!), only part of the traditional expression. This is because earlier…

“Well, since I read ‘Naita Akaoni’, I vowed that if I ever met a demon, I would be nice to it. The Red Demon sure cried a lot. If I had seen that note, I would’ve happily gone to the Red Demons’ home to drink tea and eat dessert……”

Haruhi, who was totally on the side of the demons, had stated this with a serious glint in her eye.

“Hmm? Listen up. If you ever meet the Blue Demon, you have to be nice to him. Our doors are always open to anybody, even people who are not really people.”

If we aren’t careful, the luck will continue to come in, and that’s good. But if we don’t let anything out I have the feeling it will inflate and pop, just like a bag. I agree with Haruhi on the Blue Demon part, though.

Perhaps it was because it reminded me I had once cried over this in my childhood. Or because Nagato was right there throwing beans with a crude demon mask on the side of her head. I had wondered why the half-reading, half-listening-to-Haruhi Nagato had taken an interest in a mask made of paper. She had silently picked it up, stared at it like a scanner would and put it on her head.

Maybe Haruhi’s phrase ‘people who are not really people’ touched her heart. — That was just a figment of my imagination.

After Asahina-san and Nagato’s service throwing beans ended, we went back to the clubroom, and set to finishing off the futomaki. After searching for the lucky direction of the year on the internet, Haruhi split the food up.

“Don’t talk before you finish. Here, everyone stand. Face that way and eat.”

Five people stood facing one direction, forming a line, and soundlessly started to devour the futomaki. This took a while; Haruhi and Nagato finished in about two or three bites, but Asahina-san, holding the sushi with two hands like a little woodland animal, savored it. I pray we won’t be having this tonight for dinner too.

The remaining beans got put on a plate, and ended up in my and Haruhi’s stomachs along with some tea Asahina-san steeped. Setsubun is actually a holiday for eating, I have a new understanding now.

Now, after all that, Haruhi should be pleased. But oddly, she was reserved again the following day. Like I said before, it’s not a serious melancholy, Setsubun proved that she was fine. But because of that, I didn’t know what to make of this, it doesn’t feel safe. It also seems that only I have noticed this melancholy. I don’t even need to talk about the clueless Taniguchi and Kunikida, and even the self-proclaimed Haruhi expert Koizumi hasn’t noticed.

It is indeed weird.

I’ve racked my brain, but I can’t continue to think about it.

A more straight-forwardly strange thing has occurred, and it didn’t stop at being an odd mood like Haruhi’s, it actually took a shape that you could see with your eyes.

Like I said before, I told Koizumi I wasn't going to take him time traveling, and I meant it. I don't really want to go to the past right now. I have done it lots of times, and there is no real reason to go.

Can I stick to this pathetic wish? Well, I hope so.

This time, the person who traveled back in time will not be me. I am not leaving this time at all, not one step. But even though I hoped otherwise, I was still sucked into this time's time disturbance.

That person appeared in the utility closet in the Literature Club's room.

Chapter 1

3 The traditional East Asian calendar divides the year into 24 solar terms. Risshun is the first solar term of the year and is traditionally celebrated by the Chinese and Japanese. It's also the festival which Haruhi mentioned in the prologue.

It all happened a few days after Risshun[3].

After school, I opened the door to the club room and embraced the coldness and emptiness that had awaited me. Not only was Asahina-san's warm greeting absent, even Nagato's chair was empty. Haruhi hadn't returned yet, as it was her turn today to receive advice on her further studies. She would probably be in the staff room right now, making some unreasonable "career" plans with the homeroom teacher Okabe-sensei. If someone asked her what she would like to be after she grows up, she would probably put on a stern face and reply "Dictator", "Supreme Ruler of the Universe" or something of the sort.

If by any chance you do turn out to become one of the above, I would be very depressed.

4 Chromium is passive with oxygen, i.e. forms a very thin, insoluble, protective oxide which prevents further oxidation of the underlying metal.

Anyway, I'm sure Okabe-sensei would try his best to talk her out of it, advising her to do some serious planning about her future, while carefully mincing his words. If one tried to advise her blindly, she would probably react the same way that chromium does with oxygen[4]. It takes careful manipulation of words to persuade her out of something – that's her specialty.

I placed my bag on the desk and proceeded to turn the heater on. This should be able to provide some warmth to the freezing club room, which felt even colder due to the lack of the normally present brigade members. However, it would still be some time before the heat gradually builds up. Remember, we're talking about an old heater here.

Besides the heater, the only other artifact that's able to generate heat would be Asahina-san's tea kettle. I really want to drink her tea! The mere thought of this made me anxious, as I impatiently pulled my chair closer. This is when —-

Clang.

"What the?"

The sound seemed to come from the corner of the room. I instinctively shot my glance at that direction, and looked at a tall rectangular object made out of metal, used to store cleaning utensils.

Although every class had one, how Haruhi had managed to nick one for the club room was a complete mystery.

The sound came from this broom closet.

It must have been a broom or a mop falling over, I thought to myself. Just then —-

Thunk.

This time, it was softer.

“This is starting to get creepy,” I said to myself.

Have you ever experienced something like this? Let’s say everyone happens to go out, leaving you alone in the house. Theoretically, you should be all alone by yourself, but there’s still this eerie feeling that you aren’t alone, as if someone is hiding outside the windows. Although you have the urge to find out for yourself, the thought of someone really being there is just too scary, so you would probably try to ignore the entire situation. This is mainly caused by psychological factors.

This is probably one of those scenarios, I thought to myself. Now if this had happened in my own house instead of the club room, I would have probably been too freaked out to investigate. But seeing that this is the school, and the sun still hadn’t set yet, there’s really nothing to fear.

I walked towards the broom closet and opened the door, not expecting to see anything strange. What I saw had my eyes bulging out from their sockets.

“…Eh?”

Because there was something else other than brooms and mops, something totally unexpected. It was so bizarre, in fact, that what I had wanted to say in the first place abruptly turned into a series of questions.

“…What are you doing in here?”

This question was to be expected in the first place. The person looked at me and said,

“Ah… K-Kyon-kun.”

It was Asahina-san. For some reason, a relieved expression crossed her face, as she said, “You’ve been waiting all this time, haven’t you? That’s good. I was originally thinking about what I should do, but it’s good to see you here. Well, eh… What should I do?”

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

Asahina-san blinked and looked at me. “Well… This isn’t such a bad time now, is it? We’ve definitely met here before…..” I looked at her with disbelief, as she stood together with the

brooms, mops, and other cleaning utensils in the closet. As I looked at her petite figure clad in a sailor uniform, warning signs were going off in my brain, like smoke pouring out from a factory chimney during the rapid economy growth period.

"Asahina-san…?"

What was the meaning of this? Were you planning on playing hide and seek inside the closet? No, no, that's not possible.

The smoke had already begun to make a black haze. Suddenly…

BANG! Asahina-san and I both jumped, before realizing that it was in fact someone knocking on the door. Just as I was about to answer…

"Eh? Eh! No, you can't…"

I felt my neck tie being pulled, as my whole body was jerked forward. Asahina-san forcefully pulled me into the broom closet with her, before closing the closet door softly.

Man, what does this mean? Can someone please explain to me what in the world is going on?

"Shh, Kyon-kun, be quiet. Don't make a sound."

By the light that shone through the small opening in the closet doors, I saw Asahina-san put her index finger to her lips.

Even if she hadn't said anything I wouldn't have said anything. It was not like I had anything to say at the moment anyway.

Under normal circumstances, it would be impossible to enter the broom closet. It would take the greatest effort for one person to squeeze in, never mind two. Haruhi had first abducted Asahina-san to be the official mascot because of her great figure. Needless to say, the both of us were meant to be together. And I mean that quite literally, as in the both of us pressed tightly against each other in a small broom closet. Even though there were uniforms in the way, I could still feel something warm and soft press against my chest.

As I was lost in a world of my own, I suddenly heard the sound of a door being opened. It seemed that someone had come in, but I really couldn't give a damn right now. Just like two people trying to keep each other warm with their body heat in the middle of a cottage without any heating facilities during winter, Asahina-san clung tightly to me, while breathing heavily. I had no idea why she was clinging tightly to me, but who cares. A chance like this only comes once in a blue moon.

Warning signs my ass. The black haze had suddenly turned into blissful ozone, taking me into the very depths of wonderland itself…

Oh well, I suppose there isn't any need to continue talking to myself. All I want is for time to freeze at this moment. Nothing else.

However, my fantasies were quickly put to a stop when I heard the person who had entered the room open her mouth to speak.

"Eh? There's no one here… But the heater is on… Ah? Isn't this Kyon-kun's bag? Did he go to the toilet?"

I looked at Asahina-san, who had grabbed onto my neck tie. Asahina-san also looked at me, as if returning my gaze.

Then, I slowly turned my head behind and looked at the narrow opening that was the only source of light. Even though my neck was unable to rotate 180 degrees, I could still see what was happening outside through the corner of my eye.

"…!" I remained silent, too shocked to respond.

Standing outside was another Asahina-san.

The Asahina-san outside first warmed her hands by the heater, humming to herself, then soon walked away from my line of sight. By the time she reappeared, a maid's outfit was in her hand. She then proceeded to take off the red sailor ribbon by her collar and place it on a chair. After that, she unhooked her sailor uniform, and began undressing.

5 Ellipses: plural of ellipsis.

"…!" Those three ellipses[5] appeared above my head.

Asahina-san placed her sailor blouse on the same chair, as her hands reached down to her waist. This time, my head was covered by someone's palm.

"…!"

The Asahina-san in the closet with me covered my eyes with her hands, before forcefully rotating my neck back to its original position. Even though it was dark, I could guess that Asahina-san's face would be beet red. Her lips twitched as she mouthed the words:

"Don't… look…"

Even though I don't know how to read lips, I can easily tell that was what she wanted to say. Too bad the warning came a bit too late. I had already seen something I wasn't supposed to see. Well, to show my deepest apologies, I shut my mouth and began to reassess the situation.

There are two Asahina-sans.

Wait a second. If it's Asahina-san (Big) and Asahina-san (Small) you're talking about, then I can still differentiate them. It may be due to the fact that I've seen her so many times already that even if she were to appear here, I wouldn't be surprised.

But this is a different story. Two similar looking Asahina-sans are separated by one flimsy steel door; one is inside, and the other outside; one has her body pressed tightly against me, while the other is changing into the maid uniform.

Both of them are the real Asahina-san. I took pride in having two abilities that far excelled anyone else – being able to read Nagato's emotions, and being able to tell apart real and fake Asahina-sans.

Believing in myself, I came to the conclusion that both the Asahina-sans were one and the same. Two of the same people existing in the same time and the same space could only mean one thing —- Time travel.

One of them definitely came from a different time, from the not-so-far future. I had a feeling it was the Asahina-san squeezed together with me in this tight space.

These two Asahina-sans were totally alike. Even if they were twins, there would be at least a shred of difference…

It was only logical that I thought like this, although it only lasted for a short moment. Anyone in my situation would place their emotions before their rational thinking, and I think this needs no explanation.

6 Nijo Castle (二条城, Nijō-jō?) is located in Kyoto, Japan. The castle consists of two concentric rings of fortifications, the Ninomaru Palace, the Honmaru Palace, various support buildings and several gardens. The surface area of the castle is 275,000 square meters, of which 8000 square meters is occupied by buildings. It is most noted for its twin moats and twin barriers, which Kyon finds hard choosing one over another.

No matter how you look at it, these two Asahina-sans are not going to disappear any time soon. The Asahina-san inside would probably not disappear after forcefully pulling me inside the broom closet, then forcing me to shut my eyes, and the Asahina-san outside was brushing against her clothes, making sounds that greatly stimulated my imagination. They were like the inner and outer moats of Nijo Castle[6], each awaiting my signal for fortification. It was useless. Just like how the Siege of Osaka was doomed to fail with the absence of Yukimura Sanada[7], there was no way I could choose between the two. Faced with these mental challenges that Plato himself would be proud of, only someone who had lost a couple of bolts in his brain would show no reaction.

7 A Japanese Samurai. He is most noted for his absensce during the Siege of Osaka, which many consider the prime reason for its failure.

As my brain was busy analyzing the situation, my head was cracking under the strain. If this went on, I would surely faint. I had to think of something, fast.

If this went on, I would probably hug the Asahina-san in front of me and squeeze her to death, or charge out and scare the changing Asahina-san to death. At this crucial moment, my savior finally appeared.

At the sound of the door creaking open, my breathing casually returned to normal.

"…"

It seemed that whoever had opened the door was standing there without making a sound. There was no sound of the door being closed either.

"A-Ah, Nagato-san,"

Asahina-san's clear, crisp voice could be heard.

"Please wait for a moment. I'll serve you tea immediately."

I craned my neck around again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the sight of Asahina-san's maid outfit fluttering as she walked past - that was the most I could make out from this small, miserable opening. Unable to see any more, I could only imagine Asahina-san, fully changed into her maid outfit, run towards the kettle with a pitter-patter.

"…"

I couldn't hear Nagato walking towards her seat. While Nagato is capable of walking silently, the door is too old to be closed without making any noise. That is to say, Nagato is probably still standing by the door right now.

"Eh… What's wrong?"

Asahina-san spoke with a sense of uneasiness in her voice. I suddenly imagined the sight of Nagato holding her bag in one hand, and the doorknob in the other, as she stared straight at the broom closet.

"…"

"Eh?"

“There’s something I have to tell you.”

That’s Nagato’s voice, all right.

“Eh?” Asahina-san repeated, this time sounding surprised.

“Come with me.”

“EH?” Asahina-san repeated once again, sounding even more surprised than before. “W-Where are we going?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“B-But… W-what is it… Can’t we talk here?”

“Not here.” Nagato said simply.

“A-Ah… Something to s-say to me? R-Really?”

“Yes.”

“Uh… Nagato-san? Kya… You don’t have to drag me like this…”

I could hear the sounds of Asahina-san’s footsteps leaving, and then the door was shut with a bang. What followed next was silence, as the both of them gradually retreated from the club room.

Thank you so much, Nagato.

There was another bang, as I burst out from the closet. This was followed by Asahina-san rolling out from the closet.

“Kyaa~”

Asahina-san remained crouched on the floor, as she let out a cry of tiredness mixed with relief.

“That was scary.”

I never thought she would be more surprised than me.

“Asahina-san,” I slowly said. “Can you tell me what is the meaning of this? What in the world is going on? Which time are you from?”

Asahina-san lifted her head and looked at me, her eyes blinking furiously. “Huh? Don’t you know, Kyon-kun?”

How was I supposed to know? Wait, before that, what was I supposed to know?

“But,”

Asahina-san made a face that resembled a sailor after a shipwreck who had just clambered onto a rescue boat, only to find out that the rescue boat had a hole in it.

“But the one who told me to come to this time period was you.”

Wait a second.

I racked my brains for a moment. I had definitely said something like that before. That was on the 2nd of January, because I had needed to return to the 18th of December the year before. We had gone back to that time to fix things, before returning to the present. There wasn’t any problem with that.

The problem was what happened after that. I don’t recall asking for Asahina-san’s help to bring us back to the future.

I was sure I never told her to do that.

Which is to say…

This Asahina-san had come from the future.

“What time are you from?”

“Ah…”

Asahina-san shuddered for a while, before looking at her watch.

“Eh… one week plus one day… That should be 4:15PM, eight days from now.”

“Why are you here?”

“I have no idea.”

That was an honest answer all right.

“I really have no clue. I was just following your orders after all. In fact, I was just about to ask you, why are your requests granted so easily?”

The sight of Asahina-san pouting reminded me of Haruhi. This expression was also really cute, but this was not the time to be making comparisons. I shifted my glance to the club room’s door.

“So it was my order, one that I will issue eight days later?”

“Yes. You told me nervously that I would know what to do when I got there. You also told me to tell you that your future self said ‘hi’.”

What in the world was my future self trying to say?

This was too hard to understand. Telling Asahina-san to go back to the past, what was my future self trying to do? What was the point of telling her to say ‘hi’? A friendly greeting?

Wait a moment, something’s not right again. This Asahina-san said that she came from eight days into the future. The Asahina-san dressed in a maid outfit, which was the Asahina-san from this time plane, had been dragged off by Nagato.

Huh…? What was the meaning of this? There were two Asahina-sans. One was in the club room together with me, while the other had been dragged off by Nagato to who-knows-where…

“I was brought all the way to the emergency staircase, where I had to listen to all kinds of confusing stuff.”

Asahina-san tilted her head and said, “What am I here for? What should I do now…”

Although Nagato didn’t say anything, her actions must have meant something, but what could it… Ah!

I suddenly realized what Nagato meant.

“…Now I see.”

As I realized what Nagato was trying to convey, red emergency lights flashed in my brain. If things went on like this, we would be in serious trouble.

I only hope that Nagato’s talk would last for a little longer.

“Asahina-san, you never came in contact with your future self during the past week, did you?”

“Erm… That’s right…”

Asahina-san nodded honestly, looking a bit worried. If that was so, we needed to make haste.

Because I couldn’t let both Asahina-sans see each other.

Nagato had already noticed this. She had sensed this Asahina-san and me hiding in the closet, and knew of the consequences should both Asahina-sans meet. That was why she had pulled the maid version of Asahina-san out of the club room – to buy time for me and this Asahina-san to escape.

Haruhi and Koizumi might be here any second now. Just like salmon returning to their original stream to spawn, most of the SOS Brigade members had already made it a habit to return to the club room when we wanted to rest. I know, because I was like that too.

If Haruhi happened to stumble across two Asahina-sans in two different places, I don't know if she would buy the story that Asahina-san had a secret twin.

I had to get this Asahina-san out of this place, or there would be consequences to face.

"Let's go, Asahina-san."

I grabbed my bag, slowly opened the club room door, and took a peek outside. There was not a single soul in sight. I waved my hands at Asahina-san, signaling the coast was clear. Asahina-san hurriedly ran over, as my eyes once again swept through the deserted school corridors. The countdown had already begun. There were only two rules. One, we couldn't let the Asahina-san from this time bump into this Asahina-san, and two, we couldn't let Haruhi notice that there are two Asahina-sans. I looked at the clothes rack, and for a moment thought about dressing Asahina-san up in order to avoid detection, but I gave up on that idea after realizing that those outfits would serve to attract even more unneeded attention. It was a good thing this Asahina-san was wearing a normal sailor suit uniform. Like they say, seek camouflage amongst trees by dressing like a leaf.

I grabbed Asahina-san's wrist, and hurried out of the club room. Thus began our perilous journey across the school corridors.

"Are you sure it's eight days from now?" I asked as I walked.

"Yes. You told me to return here at exactly 3:45PM, eight days from now."

Even Asahina-san's footsteps were larger than before. Taking the steps two at a time, the both of us went down the stairs and moved away from the club room. I just hoped that Okabe-sensei would spend a longer time lecturing Haruhi.

"If that is true, then you must surely know what will happen throughout this week, right?"

After descending from the stairs, I paused for a brief moment, before deciding to take the shortest path to the shoe locker directly across the courtyard. Although the chances of bumping into Haruhi were higher, it was nevertheless the fastest route possible.

Asahina-san stopped to catch her breath, as she said, "We're almost there, right?"

"Is there any need to return to the past or the future?"

"No. It was you who forcefully shoved me into the closet, after all."

First ordering her to return to this time, and now forcefully shoving her into a broom closet? What was going on? What was I thinking? Even I couldn't understand my own actions. Why hadn't the future me tagged along? That would have probably saved me the time and trouble of thinking all by myself.

We managed to reach the shoe locker without meeting anyone. It was then that I suddenly realized —-

"Where should we go from here?"

I knew that we had to leave the school, but, where do we go then? Where could I hide Asahina-san?

Now what should I do? Should I tell her to return to the future, eight days later, without accomplishing anything?

"That won't do."

Asahina-san looked at me with lonely eyes.

"If possible, I too wish to return to the future. I've tried contacting my supervisors, but they wouldn't permit it. I don't even know when am I allowed to return, as that's highly classified information."

So, does this mean that the Asahina-san eight days from the future would have to accomplish something, be it today or tomorrow, before she was allowed to return? Then let's just assume that this is true, and ignore it for the time being.

But what was that "something"?

That's what I wanted to know the most. Why hadn't my future self told her anything?

Just as I was busy cursing my future self, Asahina-san had already scrambled over to the second-year-student's shoe locker. I too was about to change from my school shoes into my sneakers…

"Asahina-san!"

I quickly searched for the time-traveler. Soon enough, I found Asahina-san tip-toeing to reach her shoe locker, which was located too high above her to reach.

"What's the matter?" Asahina-san said as she turned her head, still maintaining the same pose.

Oh it's nothing much.

"These pair of shoes belong to the you in this current time plane."

“O-Oh… You’re right…”

Asahina-san shut the locker door with a bang, as she said:

“If I had changed into these shoes, the ‘me’ in this time plane would be crushed. And I don’t recall losing anything this week either…”

That wasn’t all. If I hadn’t stopped her, this Asahina-san would have placed her current school shoes into the locker. When it was time for the Asahina-san from this time plane to return home, she would open the locker door, only to find a pair of school shoes identical to the ones she was wearing, down to the exact size.

“Y-Yes…”

Asahina-san said nervously.

“But then, how should I leave then?”

The only thing you can do is walk around in your school shoes. You may feel embarrassed or something, but there’s no other choice. It’s not like we can just nick someone else’s shoes anyway. Besides, instead of asking “What should we do?”, I think the more important question would be, “Where should we go?”

While thinking deeply about this matter, I opened my own shoe locker, and saw something inside.

I suddenly felt a wave of nostalgia. It was another message from the future.

“…I should’ve known. I knew you’d make some arrangements, Asahina-san,”

On top of my slightly dirty sneakers, was a special letter just for me.

Asahina-san and I embraced the chillingly cold wind, as we made our way down the slope.

A few North High students looked at us as we passed. It felt as if they were staring straight at the empty handed, school-shoe-wearing Asahina-san, wondering how she was so different from before. Or maybe it was just my imagination?

Standing on my right, Asahina-san’s long, maroon hair danced peacefully in the wind. Her expression, however, was far from peaceful, just like the darkening of the evening sky before a snowstorm.

I too wore a look similar to Asahina-san’s. I mean, I had just escaped from the club room. Skipping club activities without prior notice was sure to upset the Brigade Commander. Unless I

was able to come up with a reason or excuse that satisfied Haruhi, I was sure to be sacrificed in one of her future "punishments".

But even so, there was no way I could just ignore Asahina-san. For all I know, she could be in grave danger.

Anyone seeing Asahina-san walking under the cold, winter sky would get the urge to protect her. Since there was no one else suitable in sight, I guess it was all up to me to protect her.

"I'm sorry."

Asahina-san said with a monotonous yet cute voice.

"I'm always causing trouble for you…"

"Oh, it's nothing."

I replied without waiting for her to finish.

"It was me who told you to come here in the first place. So technically, it's my fault."

That applied to both me and Asahina-san (big). Why couldn't our future selves reveal more information? Why do they insist on distancing themselves from us? Do people from the future hate their past so much?

I reached for my pocket and tightly gripped the envelope within.

Inside the blank envelope was a small note that read,

"Please take care of the Asahina Mikuru beside you."

There was no name, no address, nothing whatsoever. There was no way I would be able to forget that neat, tiny font. Last spring, I received a similar letter written in the same handwriting requesting me to wait in the club room during lunch break. It was then I first met the grown-up version of Asahina-san, and received a vital clue to escaping the sealed dimension with Haruhi. I was sure it was she who wrote the letter.

But entrusting Asahina-san (small) to me? Does it mean I can do anything, Asahina-san (big)? Even as far as kissing her?

Besides, I showed that letter to Asahina-san as well. I don't suppose there'll be any problems. She would understand the meaning of "Please take care of the Asahina Mikuru beside you". If the letter was for my eyes only, then the message wouldn't refer to "Asahina Mikuru" but rather "my past self".

Asahina-san looked at the letter in surprise, as she stuttered, “W-What’s going o-on…?” It seems she didn’t notice the letter was written exactly in her own handwriting.

Come to think of it, even if she did notice, she probably wouldn’t be surprised. During our second visit to the 18th of December, she saw someone else other than myself, Nagato and Asakura. Even though she was immediately put to sleep, she must have felt her presence.

There was also that van incident that happened last month. After she talked to that bespectacled kid that lived near Haruhi’s house, she appeared so depressed that I attempted to console her. Even though I wasn’t successful, Asahina-san told me that she just realized something. I have no idea what she realized, but just like Koizumi said, the members of the SOS Brigade seem to be changing, ever so slightly.

Koizumi said that the number of sealed spaces created by Haruhi had decreased, and they were beginning to happen less frequently too.

Koizumi also said that Nagato’s aura of “alienness” had decreased.

And even though you never said anything, Koizumi, you’ve also changed, isn’t that right, Mr. Vice Commander?

I could feel it; Haruhi had gradually opened up to the public. Be it during the cultural festival, during the competition with the Computer Research Society, or during the various SOS Brigade outings, Haruhi had definitely changed. No longer was she the same melancholic, anti-social individual she was during her first year. She would smile more often, and even communicate with unknown strangers.

“If anyone here is an alien, a time traveler, slider, or an esper, then come find me!”

“To find aliens, time travelers, and espers, and play with them!”

It’s as if she knew the truth after all.

I viewed all of this as part of her growth.

Though I had no idea about my own growth.

About half an hour later, I brought Asahina-san into my house.

“So that’s why.”

Asahina-san said as she removed her shoes and placed them by the door. “So that’s why Kyon-kun didn’t come to the club room that day.”

There was no way I could let Asahina-san return to her own house. Since I couldn't think of a better place, the only place left was my own house. If there were any other time travelers like Asahina-san, I might have considered letting her stay with them.

"There's a possibility such people exist, it's just that I know nothing about them."

Asahina-san wore an expression similar to a puppy after competing in a dog show, one of grief mixed with melancholy. My expression was probably similar to hers. Even though many questions appeared in my head, I didn't feel like searching for answers right now.

Just then, my sister, who had totally nothing to do with our current problems, rushed over to Asahina-san's side.

"Ah, it's Mikuru!"

My sister was just about to drag Shamisen out from under my bed. Just as I opened my room door, she fixed her gaze on the beautiful Asahina-san, who was every North High male's fantasy, before rushing forward towards her.

"Umm, yes, sorry for disturbing."

"Huh, it's just you and Kyon-kun? Where's Haru-nyan?"

My sister looked at Asahina-san, as I grabbed the ten-year-old fifth-grader by her collar. "Haruhi's still in school. And don't come into my room without my permission."

I knew that no matter how many times I told her, it would be useless. However, it took me a lot of effort to find a suitable hiding place for Asahina-san. I didn't want anyone to find out about it.

"But, Shami doesn't want to come out, either."

My sister tugged at Asahina-san's skirt, and giggled softly.

"Where are Yuki-chan and Koizumi-kun? And Tsuruya-san? Aren't they coming?"

My sister was used to using whatever nickname she would hear. This can be seen ever since she started calling me Kyon. This little fifth-grader who had no idea what respect was. Come on, can't you call me "Onii-chan" for once?

"Oooh, it's a date! Am I right?"

I drove her out of my room before shutting the door tightly.

I sat on the floor facing Asahina-san, and said, "Tell me briefly what happened, I mean, what will happen, this week."

“Umm…”

Asahina-san paused for a moment, before saying, “Eight days ago, and that’s today, I went to the club room, but noticed that no one was there. The heater, however, was already switched on.”

That’s what I saw, all right.

“Just after I finished changing, Nagato-san entered the room, and hurriedly dragged me to the emergency staircase…”

That’s what I saw partially, all right.

“When I came back, Kyon-kun’s bag was already missing, and Koizumi-kun was already inside.”

What a narrow escape.

“About 30 minutes later, Suzumiya-san entered the club room.”

Now that’s some career advice. I shouldn’t have panicked after all.

“Suzumiya-san looked a bit angry.”

Because she argued with Okabe-sensei about her ambitions. If there were any application forms for her desired ambitions, I would want one, too.

“She looked out of the window with killer eyes, and drank three cups of tea in a —- ah!”

Asahina-san eyes bulged wide with terror, as if she had just seen a dead body in the corner of my room.

“Suzumiya-san noticed that Kyon-kun wasn’t in the club room…”

She noticed?

“And she made a phone call.”

Just as she had finished making that statement, my cell phone rang.

Oh shit.

Thinking back about it, for Asahina-san, it was like a video replay; but for me, it was a live broadcast. This wasn’t the time to listen to her slow recollections. I hadn’t even thought of an excuse for skipping brigade activities. If I answered, I would probably become the next sacrificial goat, but if I ignored the phone call, things would seem even more suspicious. Well, I guess I should ask before answering?

“Asahina-san, did I answer the phone then?”

“Um… I think you did.”

Well then, here goes.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?”

Haruhi started off with her inquisition sounding frustrated. I answered her truthfully.

“In my room.”

“What? You’re slacking off?”

“It was an emergency.”

I began to weave my lie.

“What emergency?”

“Well…”

Just then Shamisen crawled out from under my bed.

“It’s like this. Shamisen was sick, so I brought him to the vet.”

“You?”

“Yes. Only my sister was at home then. It was she who told me.”

“What kind of sickness?”

8 A form of hair loss that usually originates from the scalp. It usually causes spot baldness on the head, and is sometimes known as “spot baldness”.

“Umm… Alopecia areata[8].”

It was a name I came up from nowhere. For some reason, Asahina-san covered her cherry-like lips.

“Alopecia areata? Shamisen?”

“Yep, the vet said that it was due to stress. He’s quietly resting in my room now.”

“Do cats have nerves that detect stress? And what’s this about resting in your room, hasn’t he always been staying in your room?”

“Well, that’s right, but you see, since my sister forced him to play with her too often, it’s caused stress to build up within him. I’ve decided to turn my room into his shelter, and I’m not letting my sister come in.”

“I see…”

Haruhi snorted and fell quiet. Did she buy it?

She then proceeded to say: “Is anyone else there with you?”

“…”

I brought my phone away from my ear, as I studied the time displayed on the screen.

How did she know? Asahina-san hadn’t said a word. She even covered her mouth with both her hands to prevent accidentally making any noises.

“No one’s here.”

“Oh, is that so? I just noticed that your voice seemed different than usual, so I decided to ask you.”

Her intuition is still as sharp as usual, I see.

“It’s just Shamisen. Should I put him on the line?”

“Forget it. Just tell him that I wish him a speedy recovery. Bye.”

And to my surprise, she hung up.

I threw my cell phone onto my bed, and looked at the flowery cat, who was leaning on Asahina-san’s lap. If Haruhi had really decided to drop by for a visit, I would be in trouble.

“And then? What did Haruhi do?”

Asahina-san thought for a moment, while caressing Shamisen’s ears. “Umm… We stayed at the club room until five, and then everyone went home. Suzumiya-san… she was really quiet. All she did was flip through some magazines…”

Haruhi’s calm before the storm. Even Asahina-san had noticed it.

Had anyone else noticed? I bet Nagato had.

Shamisen lifted his paw and placed it on Asahina-san's kneecap, as if claiming it as his own. Asahina-san then stroked his back, and said, "It's as if she was different than usual… I'm sorry, I can't really remember."

That's to be expected. If someone asked me what was Koizumi's expression last Monday, all I would do was shrug and say, just like usual.

"What about the rest? Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow?"

Asahina-san gently grabbed the purring Shamisen's tail, as she lowered her head and said:

"Where should I stop?"

Just tell me what the future has in store, I'll figure out the rest.

"All right then. Next, during the holidays, all of us will be going on a treasure hunt."

A treasure hunt?

"Yes. Suzumiya-san came in the club room holding a map in her hands, and told us that we were to go dig for treasure."

Dig?

"Yes. It was Tsuruya-san that gave Suzumiya-san that map. She said that she found it in the storeroom. Apparently, it was a map that her great great ancestor left."

Asahina-san waved her fingers in the air, like a school of invisible silver fish swimming in the air.

"An old map drawn using black ink."

Tsuruya-san… Once again you hand Haruhi something weird. And this time it requires digging? It's not like we're in ancient times anymore, where would we find a place to dig?

"A mountain."

Asahina-san's answer was clear and simple.

"There's a mountain behind Tsuruya-san's house. If you look carefully while standing on the slope during your journey back from school, you should be able to notice something round in the distance."

Just hearing about it made me feel tired. It's not like I hold any vendetta against the place or anything, it's just that turning an entire mountain upside down just for the sake of some buried treasure was just as stupid as going on a picnic in this freezing climate. Just to make things clear,

Tsuruya-san owning a mountain was nothing to be surprised about. I mean, if they are rich enough to afford a private skiing facility in the midst of the wilderness, what's to be surprised at owning a mountain behind their house?

I sighed loudly without any inclination to conceal it, and said, "Did we find anything?"

"Well… No."

Even though she hesitated slightly, Asahina-san continued to shake her head.

"It's not like there's ancient treasure anywhere else anyway."

I better stop asking. Holidays were hard to come by, yet I had to waste it trying to find some buried treasure that I knew I wouldn't find. There's nothing worse than doing something you know won't work out in the end.

"Then even during Saturday and Sunday…"

Do we still have to dig? Why don't we just dig in Tsuruya-san's front yard? Who knows, maybe we'll discover an underground hot spring or something.

"No. During the weekend, we have to go for… um… a city wide search."

So it was really going to be that activity after all. Searching the city in order to discover any mysterious events was one of the SOS Brigade's main activities. Come to think of it, we haven't done it for a while now.

"We won't be searching for two straight days, will we?"

"Erm…. No. I mean yes."

For some reason, Asahina-san averted her gaze from me, and said, "Because Monday's also a holiday……"

I suddenly remembered that Monday was the day that the entrance exams were held. Students already enrolled there were allowed to skip school for the day.

So did we find anything strange?

That shouldn't be the reason Asahina-san was sent back to the past, right?

"No, none at all."

Asahina-san said as her maroon hair swept the floor.

"Just as usual, we would go to the café and have lunch…"

That just makes things even more complicated. If what Asahina-san said was true, then there wouldn't be any reason to send Asahina-san back to the past, would there? Now if only she had traveled from a few months or few years into the future, then maybe that would make some sense. But for her to travel back one week in time? Are you sure there hasn't been any mistake?

I silently observed Asahina-san, who was stroking Shamisen's belly.

Since it was only a week, there would be no need to trouble Nagato in order to return to the future. Asahina-san and I had once returned from the 7th of July three years ago with Nagato's aid. The both of us were frozen in time, as three years silently passed before us. It seems that my future self had learned a lesson. Concealing Asahina-san in a place where no one would notice her for a week, it wouldn't be long before she returned to her original time plane. There would be no need for time freezing. As for any side effects, the only one I could think of was Asahina-san aging one week older, but I doubt it would make any difference.

But what was the point? If that was so, there would be no reason to send Asahina-san back to the past. Something must have happened, something that forced my future self to send her back to this time. There was also Asahina-san (big)'s letter, which further confirmed the matter…

"What was I like when I told you to return? Did I do or say anything strange?"

"Erm…"

Asahina-san closed her eyes as she continued to stroke Shamisen, who was curled up into a ball.

I might as well try a different approach.

"Tell me what my self eight days from the future did when he told you to return here."

"That I can remember clearly, since to me, it happened just today."

Asahina-san removed her hand from the flowery cat, and began tracing shapes in the air.

"We were having an activity in the school's front yard, an SOS Brigade style lucky draw."

For what reason?

"Anyone who wished to participate had to pay a small sum of money… The winner would receive a five hundred yen coupon. Suzumiya-san was busy holding up a megaphone…"

"That should be to gather some funds for our future activities."

Asahina-san continued to explain, as if in great difficulty. "I-I was in charge of doing the promoting. Being in a crowd of so many people made me feel nervous…"

9 Kyon is referring to the incident which he and Mikuru went out on a date during "The Melancholy of Asahina Mikuru" in Volume 6.

So this was Haruhi's "Operation Payback"[9], huh.

"Asahina-san, what costume did you wear then? Don't tell me it was the miko costume…"

"Yes. How did you know?"

That was just like Haruhi's doing. In order to attract attention, she would start with a striking costume. The regular Asahina-san was already attractive enough. After dressing her up, she would be able to radiate an aura of charm that no one would be able to resist. That aura was probably what attracted the large crowd.

"I handed the winners their prizes, shook hands with them, and took photos with them."

Asahina-san grabbed Shamisen's fur, as she said uncomfortably, "Then Kyon-kun pulled my hand, and took me into the club room. You ordered me to change into my sailor uniform, and even though I didn't know what was going on, I duly obliged. You then told me to wait in the broom closet, and instructed me to return to the past, eight days ago, at precisely a quarter to four. You also told me that your past self would be waiting for me, and when I did meet him, I was to tell him that you said 'hi'. I was also told to follow everything you said."

Asahina-san removed her fingers from the air, before slowly tracing her index finger on the patterns on Shamisen's back.

"The usage of the TPDD was quickly approved. It was so fast it was unbelievable. It was like they were waiting for me to ask for approval."

That could be the case, because your superiors already know what you're going to go through. What I didn't understand was, why did my future self so willingly play the role of Asahina-san's superior? Why did I instruct her to return to the past, instead of waiting for them to tell her to? I admit that I had told Asahina-san to time travel a few times, but every time I did so, I would be filled with guilt. If possible, I didn't want her to time travel again, or, at the very least, didn't want to be the one to tell her to. Come on, Asahina-san (big), tell me something. I'm lost here.

The Asahina-san before me once again began to look depressed. I immediately recalled that this was what she looked like a month ago, during the van incident. Don't worry, Asahina-san, if it's helplessness we're talking about, I'm not that better off either, because right now, I have no idea what to do, and I don't know who to count on either.

"Sigh."

Asahina-san and I both sighed at the same time. As if on cue, Shamisen also yawned.

"Kyon-kun, open up…"

The sound of my sister yelling could be heard through the door. Judging from her voice, she must be balancing a tray too big for her, filled with cakes and juice, while carefully making her way to my room. Even though I wasn't a very sharp guy, once I saw three sets on the tray, I knew that she wasn't leaving. She must have also inherited the same dimness as I did, for she conveniently failed to notice that it was a rare chance for Asahina-san and me to be together in my room at this late hour. Blame genetics, if you will.

I immediately shot a look at her that read "Get out!", but she ignored me and sat beside Asahina-san.

"Does Shami want a cake?"

My sister put a small slice of cake near Shamisen's nose. Asahina-san smiled warmly at her antics.

My sister can be useful sometimes. As your brother, I really hope that your innocence doesn't disappear as you grow up.

After my sister played with Shamisen and Asahina-san, Asahina-san and I finally left, heading outside.

My watch read six fifteen. The sky was already darkening. It was still a month till spring.

"What should we do, Kyon-kun?"

Walking beside me, Asahina-san breathed small white clouds. If she appeared to be walking peculiarly, it was because she was wearing my spare shoes. That's better than wearing school shoes, I thought, but for shoes meant for Cinderella, they might have been a little bit too big.

"That's it." I said as I too breathed out white clouds.

I had considered letting Asahina-san stay at my house. That way, my sister would have been really happy too. But after much thought, I gave up on the idea. My parents would probably want to know why she wasn't going back to her own house, and if word reached Haruhi that Asahina-san stayed together with me at my house, I dare not imagine what disaster might befall me. If she really did come to my house to visit Shamisen, a pair of scissors and a quick snip would do the trick, but there was no way I could hide Asahina-san from her.

Petite Asahina-san's footsteps began to become clumsier, as she stumbled closer to me. When she accidentally collided with my shoulders, she let out a small shriek, and immediately hopped away from me. That made her even cuter than usual. If it wasn't only due to her shoes being too large for her, but her desire to depend on me that made her subconsciously lean against me, I would be very happy.

But I couldn't just think about my happiness alone.

I didn't have that much confidence within me. If Asahina-san did indeed depend on me, the effect would be like a domino piece leaning on another. There were only two possibilities. Either it would fall and collide with the others, or it would remain standing tall.

If I was indeed a domino piece, who would I choose to lean on? Since Asahina-san (future) chose to lean on me, who should I choose? There weren't many choices.

The first one I rejected would be Haruhi. If anyone dares to ask why, I'll scramble his brains, since he doesn't appear to have any sense of shame.

Asahina-san (present) was a no-no. She would probably believe that she had an identical twin and go ballistic. That would make things worse. And I don't intend to travel to the past to fix things up.

Koizumi, on the other hand, seemed quite reliable, but I had no faith in how his 'Organization' treated time travelers. Entrusting Asahina-san to them was definitely not a good idea. Arakawa-san, Mori-san, and the Tamaru brothers might seem nice, but if they were as Koizumi said merely low-level minions, then it's going to be some time before their superiors can gain my trust.

Under the rules of elimination, there was only one name that came in mind. She was the only one that realized our current situation, and the true person that protected the SOS Brigade, silently pulling strings behind our backs. Even though she had some weird superiors behind her, I felt that I could trust them more than Koizumi's 'Organization'…

She was the only one left.

So where should we go? There's not much of a choice, is there?

That is to say, it was finally time for Nagato Yuki to step up to the stage.

Now wasn't the time to explain. Maybe it was better if I grouped aliens and time travelers together. I mean, to travel from the past to the future, we would certainly require Nagato's help. This seemed like a better choice.

And also, I remembered something.

In order to prevent Asahina-san (Present) from seeing Asahina-san (Future), she had forcefully pulled Asahina-san (Present) from the club room, allowing me and Asahina-san (Future) to escape. In other words, she knew what was happening, and maybe she could tell us what was going on.

"Are we going to Nagato-san's house?"

Asahina-san looked at me, as she slowed down her footsteps. I encouraged her by saying, “I’m sure she’ll help us. She’s also got a spare room, and it’s just a week after all, I don’t think she’ll mind you staying there.”

If possible, I too would like to stay. I even thought of a perfect excuse.

“But…”

She sounded a bit down. “Nagato-san and I have… umm… well… Do I have to stay there for… umm… a whole week?”

There’s no need to worry. Nagato would never hurt Asahina-san. We’ve always relied on her in the past. Didn’t we seek her help when we went time traveling?

“That may be so, but…”

Strangely, Asahina-san looked at me with accusing eyes. “If I stay with her, won’t Nagato-san feel bad…?”

“Huh? Why?”

How would you know what made Nagato feel good or bad? I bet that even if someone stripped stark naked before her and started dancing a nude dance, she probably wouldn’t even flinch.

I eagerly awaited her answer, but all she did was turn her face from me, and said,

“…Oh, never mind.”

Conveying thoughts in speech, and in the most subtle manner possible, that was one of Nagato’s specialties. That remains true even now.

Standing outside the luxury apartment, I punched out that familiar number, and duly awaited her voice.

“…”

“It’s me. And Asahina-san too. It’s like this…”

“Come in.”

I wonder how many times has the same conversation happened? I’ve brought both big and small versions of Asahina-san here, and if memory serves me right, this should be the fourth time. The first time was during Tanabata four years ago, along with Asahina-san (small). The second time

was also on that day, but with Asahina-san (big). The third and last time, was during the 2nd of January, just last month.

Asahina-san wore a look of anxiousness on her face. This was also something I was used to. That same expression would remain unchanged as the elevator ascended.

The way she tightly gripped the sleeve of my shirt, there was no way to describe how grateful I was. With a face as tiny and cute as hers, there was no reason not to protect her. If I didn't protect her, even if the Earth was reduced to dust, I wouldn't be able to find anyone more suitable than her to protect.

"…"

Nagato's apartment door was half opened, as if awaiting us. That sailor uniform was yet again something I was used to. The only times that I had seen her in casual clothes were during the summer vacation and the winter vacation. The way she looked at us was nothing special, but Asahina-san started to freak out at that very moment.

"Ah well… Sorry, Nagato… Some rather unexpected things have happened, so we've decided to come here…"

That was the truth, after all.

"It's okay."

Nagato nodded her head stiffly.

"Come in."

Asahina-san stuttered as she remained motionless on the spot, that oh-so-familiar reaction when faced with Nagato. I ushered her in with a push of my hand, and she finally stepped in the door. Such embarrassment made me wonder how had she once slept in this very room just one month ago.

"Sorry to disturb you…"

Nagato's apartment was once bare and empty, devoid of any signs of interest, and filled only with living necessities. Now, there was actually a large curtain draped over the window in the living room, and it was a winter-style curtain to boot. This wasn't here when I visited last spring, and its existence proved of large significance. The games that we had played during Christmas were still rolled up and placed near the wall, but there was still no sign of any rugs or TVs. There was only a lone heater in the room, and a sturdy table. I had an urge to check out Nagato's bedroom, but my instincts warned me against it. If it was plastered with cute, pink wall paper with a flowery wall hanging, and a stuffed doll in the shape of a lamb by her pillow, I would totally erase any memory of Nagato Yuki from my mind, and start to know her again from

scratch. But even so, I dare say that even if you traced time back to the Mesopotamian era, you wouldn't be able to detect any traces of such a thing.

I had already heard from Asahina-san what would happen in the future, at least until tomorrow.

Now, I had important questions to ask.

"Umm, Nagato, do you know that Asahina-san is from the future…" Oh wait, everyone knows that. "Sorry, I mean, do you know that this is another Asahina-san from eight days in the future?"

I said this while sitting by the heater in the living room.

"I do."

Nagato sat kneeling before me, and stared straight at Asahina-san. Asahina-san jumped in fright, before hurriedly sitting by my side, and lowered her gaze.

"Asahina-san doesn't seem to know why she was sent here." I explained. "From what she told me, it seems that my future self sent her here… Nagato, do you know why?"

Even if she didn't know why, I was sure that Nagato had means to find out, so when the word "No" escaped her lips, I didn't feel uneasy. I mean, all she had to do was to perform that synchronization thingy to find out.

But Nagato's next reply totally betrayed my expectations.

"No. In my current state, there is no way that I can synchronize with my past or future self."

Before I had a chance to ask why, Nagato said,

"Because there is a restriction program."

I still don't get it. Why?

"My freedom is currently being limited, since there is still the possibility that I may go astray again. This is what they have decided."

This restriction rubbish, was it placed by your boss?

"The Integrated Data Sentient Entity has approved of it."

Nagato's expressionless face appeared to be different from usual.

"But it was placed by me personally, by my own will."

Nagato said indifferently.

“A password is required to lift the seal, and the password is governed by someone else. My will alone is insufficient to disable the program. And I have no intentions of doing so.”

So that is to say, Nagato had no way of synchronizing with her future self. She had no means of knowing what would happen in the future, and consequently, what would happen eight days later. If so, what should I do?

“Just act according to your better judgment.”

A pair of black pupils stared directly at me.

“I’ll try my best to do so.”

I could only drop my jaw. Nagato was actually showing self-awareness. Wait, am I being lectured by Nagato here?

“Even though I have lost the ability to perform synchronization, I have obtained freedom beyond what I had imagined. Now I am able to act according to my own free will, unbound by the future.”

Nagato sure has changed. Since when has she loved to talk this much?

“I feel as though I carry the responsibility of shaping my own future.”

Nagato continued to stare at me, as she said:

“The same applies to you. Since…”

Nagato said softly, “It’s your own future.”

I closed my eyes and drifted into deep thought.

Let’s say I had the ability to see the future. I would know what my future self was trying to do. And let’s say that no matter what I did, I wouldn’t be able to change the future, so the only choice was to walk the same path. So, should I follow the flow of time naturally? Is that the right choice? That I would know when the time came?

After a few minutes of internal struggle, I finally came to the conclusion that since I didn’t have the power to see the future, I didn’t have a choice. Come to think of it, I didn’t have the power from the start either. This brings me back to square one. Or does it?

Nagato must have put up quite a struggle, not only with the Integrated Sentient whatever, but also with her own will. She must have known that she would run astray, and tried her best to prevent it from happening. Maybe it’s because she knew of it from the start, but no matter what

she did, she wouldn't be able to change the outcome. It's not a matter of who's to blame, and even if it did come to that, I'm sure I was equally guilty. I had noticed slight changes in Nagato ever since summer, but I didn't give it too much thought. Even though I had a slight urge to let Haruhi take the slate instead of me, I didn't want anybody to go through the mental stress I was going through right now.

Just last month, this Nagato had said to the past Nagato:

"Because I don't want to."

Nagato knew that her past self would do what she had to do, or at least, she believed that she would do what she had to do.

There is no need to decide upon things which are yet to happen. Isn't that what I've been doing all along?

I listened to my future self's voice, returned to the past, and told my own self those exact same words. I never told him what to do after that. I left it for him to decide.

Because I know there'll be a way.

And I did think of a way. That's why I'm standing here right now.

"It doesn't matter."

Nagato's voice woke me up from my hallucinations. Those expressionless black eyes looked even brighter than usual. "My highest priority is to protect you and Suzumiya Haruhi."

Oh how I hope you would include Asahina-san as well. And while we're at it, let's throw Koizumi in too. During the Snow Mountain incident, that fellow promised to help you as well.

Nagato nodded and said,

"If the enemy tries to interfere."

Could you give us an example? What kind of enemies?

"The Macrospatial Quantum Cosmic Existence - An entity that is of different origin from the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. They have tried to imprison us in a different sealed space once."

So you're referring to those guys behind the Snow Mountain incident, eh.

"They are a similar, but separate entity. Compared to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, they exist in a different—-"

Nagato shut her mouth, as if searching for a suitable word.

"—-place. Even though both of them know of the existence of the other, there hasn't been any contact before, because the both of them feel that even if there was contact, there couldn't be mutual understanding."

"However, they have noticed."

Noticed what?

"Suzumiya Haruhi."

How should I describe this feeling of nostalgia? Everyone had noticed Haruhi. Everyone wanted to observe her very actions, be it her usual antics or her eccentric behaviors. Some had even wanted to pitch in and join the fun.

"So they were the ones behind the Snow Mountain incident."

"Yes. They were the ones who gave me extra burden, creating a scenario hard to escape with my own powers alone."

Then what were your bosses doing then? Having a lunch break?

"Modifications were made so that I could not fully understand what the Integrated Data Sentient Entity was trying to convey."

But then Nagato lowered her head, and said, "But I know that that was one of their means of 'negotiation'."

What negotiation? We were totally put in the dark. That kind of method is totally unacceptable in modern day society.

"They are a life form totally different to us. We cannot understand how they think, and it is estimated that they do not understand how we think."

Isn't there any other means of communicating with them? I really want to know how they think about Haruhi.

"There is currently no means of transmitting data with 100% efficiency."

That's what I thought. They were the kind to use snowstorms instead of summer days to relay a message.

"If it is a minor transmission, it may be possible."

Nagato moved her neck and said, "As long as they create a living humanoid interface like myself, even if they couldn't achieve 100% efficiency, they would still be able to achieve a high percentage, especially through means of speech."

There wouldn't be some of them here already, would there?

"There may be."

Even though I didn't wish for that possibility, I felt as if I would be even more surprised if they didn't have at least one humanoid interface. What was this feeling, I wonder?

"Ah…"

That ah~ was made by Asahina-san.

"Could it be…"

Asahina-san looked as if she had understood something, and looked at Nagato as if she had just realized something shocking. Nagato also looked at Asahina-san. The sight of an alien locking sights with a time traveler freaked me out.

"What's the matter?"

"No, it's nothing… Really…"

As I was astonished by Asahina-san's stunned reaction, Nagato got up, looked at us and said,

"I'll go and make some tea."

After making that statement, she headed towards the kitchen, before stopping halfway and saying,

"Or would you like…"

Like what? As I awaited her response, she came up with one, simple word,

"Dinner?"

Today's dinner was canned curry, specially prepared by Nagato herself. As I saw her empty five people's share into the cooker, I suddenly felt that it was Nagato's usual doing. If it were Haruhi, she would have added some strange ingredients into the cooker. It was hard to describe. I wonder which should I choose, taste or happiness?

The reason why Asahina-san was willing to sit down in the living room with an uneasy look, was because Nagato had told her to sit still and not move. When Asahina-san suggested that she help out, Nagato simply said, "You are my guest," and started to prepare dinner. All she did was take out five cans of curry from a drawer, and start to slice up some cabbages.

After a while, the previously empty plate was filled with rice, and topped with steaming curry. Even in such simplicity, I was able to feel a sense of joy. This was the main dish. A side dish – a bowl of salad – was also laid before me and Asahina-san. An extremely uncomfortable Asahina-san bowed very low before looking at the plate of rice that was piled like a mountain before her. She made a face that suggested she was in a difficult position, and, like a gastric patient trying to resist the pain, she tried to smile as beads of sweat trickled from her face.

"Eat."

"Well then, *itadakimasu.*"

I put my palms together, before reaching for my chopsticks. At the scent of curry, my stomach had begun making rumbling noises. It seems that it had been waiting for a long time. Although I was mildly disappointed that the ingredients weren't prepared by Nagato herself, a little fast food once in a while wasn't that bad either. Looking at Nagato silently devouring the mountain before her, and Asahina-san politely eating her fill, even the rice tasted good.

Even though the three of us were completely silent, I somehow felt that it was the perfect atmosphere, fitting for the dining table in Nagato's apartment. If Haruhi were here, she would have been so frustrated that she would probably have resorted to talking to herself.

After that, Asahina-san, who looked like she was about to faint, shoved half of her remaining curry rice onto Nagato's plate. It was only after the three of us had finished eating that Nagato served us tea.

"Thanks for your hospitality. I'll be going now."

"Huh? Kyon-kun, aren't you going to stay with me?"

Asahina-san, who was quietly sipping her tea before, suddenly looked at me with shocked eyes. Even Nagato turned to look at me, her cup still placed by her mouth.

"Well, that's…"

The desire to say aloud "Well, that's not such a bad idea" sped through my mind, like a runaway spaceship. Images of Asahina-san, dressed in one of Nagato's nightgowns, drying her hair with a towel, as well as Nagato, whose hair was still wet, silently gulping down a cup of milk, appeared in my mind before disappearing with a flash. For some reason, Haruhi's face appeared in my mind, as my memory drifted back to the two bed sheets in the other room. This woke me up from my fantasies, as I said,

"Well, that's too bad. I'll come over here tomorrow after school."

I then faced the owner of the apartment and said,

"Is that all right, Nagato?"

Nagato nodded. Seeing this, I faced a trembling Asahina-san and gave her a slight nod.

“Before I return, just stay here and don’t do anything. I’m sure we’ll figure out a way.”

Those weren’t words of consolation. If anything happened, all I needed to do was have Nagato freeze time again, just like she did the first time when we returned from the 7th of July four years ago. If she could freeze time for three years, I’m sure that a week would be a breeze. I also had a feeling there was more to this matter. My future self wouldn’t just order her to return to the past without a good reason, this I strongly believed. The letter in my pocket further confirmed this point.

Isn’t that so, Asahina-san (big)?

You have to be related to this incident, somehow. Or am I mistaken?

After parting with an Asahina-san who was invoking my strongest desires to protect her, I gazed up at the stars and made my way home.

As I walked, all I could think about was how willing Nagato was to limit her own freedom, as well as her willingness to talk about it. Hmm, Koizumi, maybe you’re right after all.

Maybe the day when Nagato Yuki will become a normal, bookish high school student of the Literature Club, totally unrelated to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, isn’t that far away after all. When that day comes, even if something did happen, I wouldn’t have to rush to Nagato to ask for her help or give her any additional burdens to shoulder. She would become one of our friends, who could shoulder our problems together.

If that time really came, we wouldn’t have Nagato’s powers to rely on. We would probably be in an even stickier situation then.

But so what?

I never once regretted reverting that world, where Haruhi and Koizumi were non-North High students and where Asahina-san didn’t have any memory of me, back to normal. But I also slightly missed that world. The day that Asakura made the oden, just as I was about to leave—-

Nagato displayed a light smile.

I really wanted to see it again.

I really hoped I could.

Chapter 2

The next day, I, who had wanted to come to school right away, discovered a letter in my shoe locker.

“I knew it.”

So as not to let anybody else see it, I hastily stuffed it into the pocket of my jacket, hurriedly put on my shoes, and ran to the washroom. It was an unwritten rule that all private messages were to be read in the washroom.

I ripped open the envelope and took out the papers inside. There were two of them.

The first one was obviously written by her. It said,

“In ○○ town, in the corner of the cross-junction from no. ×× to no. △△, walk south from there. There is a road without any roadmarks nearby. Place the specified object on the place where that road meets the market between 6:12PM and 6:15PM.”
P.S. Asahina Mikuru must go with you."

That's all I can read from that letter. At the end of that letter, there was a string of symbols I have never seen before. It resembled a signature, slightly. But I don't know what those marks mean. Actually, it probably isn't a signature. I don't even understand what the letter is calling for, but I must think of a solution.

“What kind of instructions are these?”

The very-difficult-to-understand letter came with a picture. I held the roughly-sketched map that just wasn't good, and found the place marked with an X. But, if the X point hadn't corresponded with the letter, I would've thought it was a joke.

“I don't get it, Asahina-san.”

So this evening, between 6:12 and 6:15, I'm supposed to put that thing there?

What for?

I re-read it several times, until I memorized what it said. Then I put the letter into the deepest part of my book bag. I cannot let it be found by Haruhi. If it is discovered, I don't have anything I could use as an excuse.

I came out of the washroom and walked up the stairs, thinking.

But, I finally have a clue. This must be the reason Asahina-san came from eight days in the future. This means there has to be something that must be done in this time. And it has to be something that Asahina-san from school cannot do. But why can't she?

Still struggling with this question, I entered the classroom. The person who greeted me is none other than Haruhi, who was quiet to the point of it being suspicious.

Haruhi raised her head and looked at me,

“How's Shamisen?”

“Ah——”

That's a way to do it.

“Not bad.”

“Ah, I see.”

I sat down on the ice-cold chair, and calmly looked over at Haruhi.

It seems like she hasn't noticed anything. Looking very bored, she sat there with her hand on her cheek, her mouth tightly shut. She looked very distracted. She's always been like this recently. I don't know what she's thinking either, and I don't have the time to find out.

“Hey, Haruhi.”

“What?”

“It's about Shamisen, I have to take him to the vet today. In fact, I have to take him to the hospital quite a lot these couple of days. So, I probably won't make it to the clubroom today. Sorry…”

I was certain she was going to glare at me,

“Go ahead.”

I didn't think she was going to reply so placidly. Was she that worried about Shamisen?

“What's with that expression?”

Haruhi looked at the extremely startled me, her gaze softening.

“Haphazardly loafing around is a definite no-no. But if you have a good reason, I am an understanding brigade leader, I won't pester you the whole time.”

Thinking back about whether or not I've ever seen an understanding, non-pestering Haruhi, I racked my brain, was it possible this was the first time? As I thought this,

“I'll go see him in a couple of days. Tell him I told him to get better soon. And your sister too, she's so cute, even a cat wouldn't hate her.”

She moved her chin around on her hand, looking like she didn't really care. A non-energetic Haruhi is really not like her, but I have to thank her. I still have the Asahina homework problem to do.

Well, what's this mood? The person behind me just continuously stares out the window, I suddenly have both an odd feeling of deja vu and a feeling that this was new. What is it with this mood? If only Haruhi would be like this even half of the time, that would be good.

“Morning!”

The bell hadn't stopped ringing yet, but Okabe-sensei had already arrived full of energy.

I get it now.

Haruhi's melancholy wouldn't be here for long. If I think about it, this is the first accurate prediction I've seen from the people in the future. According to Asahina-san, she will soon bring us along on a treasure hunt, along with a big group of other people. If Haruhi was like now the other half of the time, it would be quite good.

The good and the bad, now I can be relieved.

Lunchtime, I quickly shoved my lunch down my throat and ran to the clubroom.

If she's not in her classroom, she's got to be here. Just like I thought, Nagato was sitting at the designated spot, reading.

“Nagato, where's Asahina-san?”

Since I brought her there, I should at least show some care.

“…”

Nagato's low gaze shifted onto my body and stopped. She was silent for a little while, as if considering how to tell me.

“Why do you ask?”

“She wasn't any trouble?”

“No.”

Too lucky. When I thought of Nagato and Asahina-san having a pajama party, my heart jumped.

“But.”

Nagato calmly said.

“When she's with me, she's always disturbed and restless.”

Her smooth gaze dropped onto the hardcover book again.

I silently stared at Nagato, wanting to see if any emotion would show itself on her face. Such as a feeling of regret, or a look of loneliness —— But, I didn't see any such expression on the forever emotionless Nagato.

I understand why Asahina-san is restless. Being in an enclosed space with Nagato only is something that can cause the majority of people to become disturbed. Besides me, Haruhi and Koizumi, everyone feels that way. Mmm, Tsuruya-san's probably fine too. But that's not the problem.

Nagato understands Asahina-san's uneasiness, yet still has an attitude like that, that's quite weird.

“Asahina-san and I always need your help, I'm allowed to be worried.”

“Same.”

Nagato didn't raise her head.

“You've helped me too.”

But, the person who has helped me the most is you, Nagato. You have saved my life several times. Pretty much every time something happens, you are the most reliable. I'm not saying Asahina-san and Koizumi aren't helpful, but if you weren't here, there would be even more problems.

“It started with me.”

That wasn't your fault. If we were saying whose fault it was, you can blame me or the Integrated Data Sentient Entity all you want. That wasn't one person's fault. It was because that thing happened that I realized what reality is like. And I got to see Haruhi with a ponytail. If we were saying how much I've changed, that experience really changed me.

“I see.”

Nagato, seeming like she was talking to herself, flipped the page. A chill wind blew by, shaking the windows. I turned on the electric stove.

“What's your leader doing? They've fixed things with the extremists, right?”

“The Integrated Data Sentient Entity never completely agrees. But right now, the main school's giving the orders.”

As I thought, even the aliens struggle internally.

“Are you part of the main school?”

“Yes.”

And Asakura's a pawn of the extremists. Wait, there's only two? Are there any other “parties”?

“The ones I know of are the Moderates, the Innovative, the Compromise, and the Thinking party.”

Not one is the same. Asakura went and tried to kill me to get Haruhi to do something, and created trouble for people around her. Nagato made that Asakura disappear. She's still up in space, arguing, I guess.

My perception of the gods in the sky has changed.

“I am unable to transmit the ideas of the other schools.”

Nagato slowly raised her head, her gaze leaving the page.

“But, I am here,”

said the unshaking voice, there was nobody more reliable than her.

“That won't flatter anymore.”*

On my way back from the clubroom, I met two very familiar faces.

“Hey, Kyon-kun!”

Tsuruya-san was waving wildly. The person beside her asked worriedly,

“Um, is the cat okay?”

“I heard he went to the hospital.”

It's Asahina-san, the normal Asahina-san from this time. She doesn't seem to know she'll be visiting the past again soon.

“Has it had medicine?”

Ah, I see. When Haruhi phoned, Asahina-san must have been beside her, so she knew what we would say.

“It's not serious, but it will take some time to get better.”

I gently shook my messed-up head. Of course the two Asahina-san's don't look any different. If I'm not careful, I will paint myself an illusion that the Asahina-san who is supposed to be lazing at Nagato's came to school. Even if I fell into an illusion, I wouldn't even notice, unless Asahina-san spoke.

“Shami is suffering from hair loss because of stress, that's so unbelievable,”

Tsuruya said while laughing.

“But compared with the other problems, this is quite normal, I guess. It must be because he's not getting enough exercise. Obviously Kyon-kun's house doesn't have mice! In my yard, wild mice occasionally appear! How about you bring your cat over? It's a good way to kill some time.”

“It depends on the situation. When he's healed, I will do just that.”

In this cold weather, I have a feeling he won't want to go outside. When spring comes, Shamisen might become happy. When the cherry blossoms bloom, Haruhi will want us to go appreciate the flowers at some garden.

“Kyon-kun, are you coming for club activities today?”

Asahina-san asked feebly. I think I should just go ask the other Asahina-san what her plans for today was.

“Coincidentally, I have to take Shamisen to the vet today too. I already told Haruhi.”

“Really?”

Like she cared about Shamisen from the bottom of her heart,

“I hope he gets better soon.”

Although my heart became a bit uncomfortable, I have to give off a serious mood and nodded.

“I'll spend the next couple days comforting him. He'll be fine after that. He is male, after all.”

After saying goodbye to the two people who went to buy juice, I returned to classroom 1-5. Since it doesn't have a heater, it seems like it's colder than the clubroom I just visited. I can only

depend on the heat from other people's bodies. The highest heat source, Haruhi, wasn't in, as usual.

In order to join a chatting group, I walked towards Taniguchi and Kunikida.

Then, school ended.

I quickly left. There was still a bit of time until the time mentioned in the letter, but I was a little worried about leaving Asahina-san all alone. And, to follow Asahina-san's (Big) instructions, I still need to prepare something.

I went home first, to find the hammer and nails and put them into my book bag. Then I rode my old bike and rushed to Nagato's apartment. On this cold winter day, my ears froze until they hurt. But when I thought of Asahina-san waiting for me at the apartment, I couldn't care less about the pain. Something good was waiting for me there, this was my encouragement. Ever since summer vacation, I've wanted to see this and it was finally coming.

My talk with Nagato in the clubroom also contributed to my change of mood.

No matter what happens, Nagato will protect Asahina-san and me, so I want to protect Nagato and Asahina-san too. Haruhi treats the brigade members as private property, so if a nosy person comes along, she will brandish her weapons. At least Koizumi can look after himself. I cannot imagine a dead-tired Koizumi. If he does get too tired and has to rest, I can't ignore him. Haruhi will make me, anyway. She doesn't care if I live or die. Doesn't matter. I've been part of the SOS Brigade for almost a year, I haven't been worn down to a state of no-confidence yet.

″Yo..to" I let the back wheel rise in the air and stopped the bike, running towards the doorbell of the apartment. I pressed Nagato's buzzer.

“…Yes?”

I was relieved to hear Asahina-san's voice.

“It's me. Nothing happened, right? Good.”

“Eh… Yes, nothing… Ah, I'll be there right now. Wait a minute.”

I actually wanted to go into Nagato's room and wait, but Asahina-san hung up the phone immediately.

So I waited there for several minutes, after about five minutes, Asahina-san showed up, carrying slippers in one hand.

Asahina-san looked comforted after seeing me, but suddenly became very serious. Frozen and shivering, she ran my way.

“I borrowed the shoes from Nagato-san. And this is the extra key.”

Asahina-san pointed to the key in her hand.

“This, could you please return it to Nagato-san for me?”

Hm? What's the matter? Since you're temporarily living here anyway, can't you just borrow both the slippers and the key?

“About that…”

Asahina-san lowered her head and looked up at me.

“I think it would be better if I didn't live at Nagato's house.”

Why?

“How should I explain this…”

She used her hand to push down her light, brown hair that was dancing with the winter wind.

“Nagato-san, when I'm with her alone in a room, she's generally very anxious.”

I can't help but stare at Asahina-san.

I have also heard the exact same thing from Nagato. No, I can't imagine for a second how Asahina-san would know what an anxious Nagato would look like.

“Umm.”

Like an adult explaining something to a child, Asahina-san said,

“I've always felt that way. At night, when I'm sleeping… Ah, the rooms are separate, I sleep in the extra room, but Nagato's always standing by my pillow. Lifelessly staring at me…”

It can't be, that's like a spirit appeared.

“…This is just what I think, but, it's like Nagato hasn't figured me out yet.”

Asahina-san took a long breath, looking somewhere near my chest.

“In the clubroom, when everyone's around, you can't sense it. But when you're alone with Nagato-san, you can see it vibrating in the air. It was like that last month too. When we came

back from the past, and I woke up and found Kyon-kun gone, I felt she was silently staring at me then too."

What do you mean? No matter how I think of it, Nagato would never hurt Asahina-san.

"Mhm, I know. Nagato-san doesn't think like that. This is just my own observations… But, I know this for sure, Nagato-san looks as if she is concerned about me."

What a broken explanation. I don't get it.

Asahina-san's facial expression made it seem as though I just scolded her. In a lonely voice, she said,

"Nagato-san, she appears as though she wants to be like me."

"?" Goes me.

"Like, going on random missions aimlessly with Kyon-kun and the like. I'm always doing that, right? Nagato-san's always been watching us. It was like that during Tanabata, and during the endless summer too…"

In the past year, many marks have been left by the SOS Brigade. Of us, the most capable is Nagato.

"I think the reason Nagato-san changed the past was this mentality too. Nagato-san always helps others, unlike me, who always needs others to help me."

Asahina-san blew a breath into the palm of her hand, then, with a "hmn!", nodded her head.

"After thinking about it, I guess it makes more sense now. The vibes I felt from Nagato-san. Maybe Nagato-san just wants to become like me."

Again, my mind started to fantasize. One in which I went toward the clubroom as usual, but there was Nagato in a maid uniform waiting for me, happily steeping tea. One even therapy couldn't fix. Then she would, smiling, carefully place the teacup in front of me, and then, holding the serving plate, ask me how it tastes…

If Nagato was like that, I wouldn't complain. But then where would the Nagato that sits at the side of the table reading go?

"I suspect even Nagato-san doesn't know about it. So, it'd be better if I just left. Otherwise, she'll become unstable.

Asahina-san has a sincere look. She's not wanting to stay away from Nagato's house, but is actually thinking of Nagato. We already know what the abnormal Nagato is like, and we both know what causes it. In the end, she set a limit on herself. Reject synchronization. She wanted to

be able to depend on herself to resolve the problems. Is Nagato's ideal Asahina-san? Someone different from her, one who, when glitches occur, goes about doing her thing without actually knowing about what has happened. A time traveler.

That's extremely paradoxical. Asahina-san is going crazy over knowing nothing, while Nagato is depressed due to knowing too much.

I lifted my head and looked at Nagato's room.

“Yeah…”

Perhaps Asahina-san's thesis is in fact true. No matter how I think of it, the people with sharper wits are generally female. Haruhi and Tsuruya-san might just have a little too much.

Nagato has Nagato's advantages. That's more than enough, but I didn't realize that this was a difficult situation. Even if I went and asked her, she would just pretend to know nothing.

It's also possible Asahina-san's just thinking too much about this. Maybe Nagato doesn't really care. Maybe she just doesn't have a book to read occasionally, and just stares at Asahina-san without any definite purpose. But since Asahina-san is this worried, I can't just say that she's wrong.

“Got it. I'll go explain to Nagato. We'll figure out where you're going to sleep on the way back.”

The most that could happen would be her sleeping at my house. It's not like we can't find another place for her to stay.

“Oh, yeah, I have something to show you. I found another letter in my shoe-locker.”

As I took out the letter, Asahina-san had a look that resembled one I would see on a person looking at the exam booklet before the exam.

“Ah, this…”

She pointed to the last part on the instruction letter.

“That's the Mission Code. The most important thing.”

I don't know if that line's a mark or a signature. Is it possible that's some future language?

“No, it's not a language… That's a code. It's something we specifically use to indicate someone is important. That means, no matter what happens, we must complete the task set.”

“That's what it means?”

After remembering the content of the letter, I said,

“There's got to be some hidden meaning to this.”

“That's…”

Asahina-san slightly tilted her head, and with a face of puzzlement, replied,

“I don't get this at all…”

“If we disregarded this and didn't do anything, what would happen?”

“We can't ignore it.”

Studying the letter, Asahina-san said,

“After seeing this code, I must do what it says.”

Then, she turned her edgy gaze onto me.

“Also, Kyon-kun, you will help me, right?”

We have arrived at the place the letter indicates. The method of transportation is the bike, I don't need to say I pedaled, carrying Asahina-san, who was sitting on the back. Anyway, even though the location is in the city, we can get there by biking.

We also took a little walk to kill some time. According to my watch, it's just after 6:10. If we follow the instructions, we need to have this thing put in place sometime between 6:12 and 6:15.

The fact that the sun set a long time ago makes me feel a little lonely. The road is really far from any residential houses, so pedestrians are sparse and almost no one around. There's even a little shortcut off to the side that no one's bothered to fix up. The path doesn't look like a shortcut though, since if it is actually a shortcut to somewhere, normal people won't just randomly walk that way. On the hand printed map, the 'X' was marked showing a place a couple of meters away from the intersection of this road and the asphalt city road.

It's a good thing no pedestrians were around. What we were about to do is something only delinquents would do. When all is said and done, this was a practical joke.

We've only prepared three things. A hammer, some nails, and an empty juice box. You can probably guess what we're up to now, right?

“Let's start,” I said.

“No problem.” Asahina-san nodded her head.

I, who had been hiding behind a pole, dashed toward the destination, and started to nail nails into the ground. The ground was hard, and you need a lot of energy just to put half of a nail into the ground. Especially since I can't make a loud sound, in case people nearby hear it.

I worked fast, and finished before the thirty seconds were up.

I put the nails into the empty box, and then returned to the pole where Asahina-san was waiting for me. And then we went to hide in a dark place a bit farther off.

What will happen next? What will the box do? Let us observe some more.

We didn't wait long. The time is now 6:14 in the afternoon.

It looks like a male slowly coming down the street from the opposite direction of where we were hiding. He was wearing a windbreaker and carrying a shoulder bag. From what I can see, he hasn't noticed us yet. He was walking with his face downward, and he looked very drained. He suddenly stopped. He was looking in the exact direction the empty juice box was pointing.

“Ha…”

I heard a sigh. As I was thinking he was a good person who felt disturbed by some litterbugs, he walked towards the empty juice box without hesitation, decisively lifted up his foot and swung it down in a kick.

Needless to say, the juice box didn't miraculously fly into a goal, not only that, but it didn't even move——

“Gah—!? Wahhh.”

“What the hell, that hurts~!”

It hurt so much he was rolling on the ground. He was crying so much it was like he was dying.

“ What the..?! Who did this! Putting this… it, it hurts~!”

Asahina-san and I stared at each other in dismay.

This was the point of putting it there?

“Who knows…?”

We had a conversation using our gazes. We nodded at exactly the same time, and came out of our hiding spot. We walked down the path, pretending we were passing this place as though we occasionally do.

“Are you okay?”

Asahina-san said to the person laying on the ground grasping his toenail. I calmly stood by Asahina-san, and looked down at the complaining man.

“Ah?”

I do not recognize the distorted face that belongs to a skinny man in his mid-20s. Under his windproof jacket, he was wearing western clothing, even sporting a tie. He looks exactly like every other average, middle-class working man.

Trying to look nice, I said:

“Want some help?”

“Uh… Please. Thanks.”

He grabbed my hand and managed to stand. Wrinkling his brow, he lifted his foot.

“Damn. Who did that? This kind of childish prank.”

“It was over the top.”

I knelt down and picked up the juice box. There was an indent on one side. The nail that was secured down was also crooked due to the kick. From the looks of it, he's an accomplished kicker.

“How dangerous.”

I said seriously, pulling out the nail. Thanks to his powerful kick, it came out without any trouble at all. To destroy the evidence, I slipped the nail into my pocket.

He lifted his leg and lowered it several times. Each time, it was accompanied by a wrinkling of the brow and a phrase.

“This is quite troublesome. I don't think anything's broken… Maybe I twisted my ankle?”

“Um," said Asahina-san, "It'd be better if we went to a hospital…”

“I think so too.”

He hopped on one foot towards the busy street, almost staggering.

“Lend me your shoulder, please.”

So as not to let him fall, I hurried to his side, and asked,

“Should we call an ambulance?”

“Ah, that's not required. I've called one before. To make such a big fuss over such a little thing isn't too good. Sorry, but can you take me like this to the main road over there?”

“Eh, of course I can.”

No matter what you say, it's my fault. I honestly want to apologize to him.

I took advantage of the streetlights to examine the man who was grabbing my shoulder and walking slowly more carefully. He was actually a uniquely handsome man.

“There was a problem at work.”

On the way to the road, he started to explain about himself.

“I shouldn't have kicked that box just because I was lamenting. I guess I deserved it.”

“I disagree. I believe the bad people are the ones who put that mischievous thing there in the first place.”

“I guess you're right, what kind of a prank is that? They have to do it now, of all times.”

He looked at me and then at the taciturn Asahina-san following a few step behind, and he started to laugh.

“That girl, is she your girlfriend?”

I didn't have anything to say, so I probably just stared for a second or two.

“Eh, well… Something like that…”

At times like this, I have to say that, even if it is lying.

“Is that so.”

He believed what I told him without any doubts, and then reverted to his former state of looking like it hurt a lot.

We reached the main road, and managed to call a lucky taxi by waving. This wasn't over until we got the anxiously sweating man into the back seat of the taxi on this cold day.

“Thank you very much. Sorry for taking up some of your time.”

No, no, it was technically all my fault. Just so you know, this Asahina-san is innocent. If you ever somehow find out who did it and want revenge, please take it up with the older her… As I thought this deep in my heart, the taxi drove away, leaving us two. I asked Asahina-san,

“Is that all we need to do?”

“Yeah…”

Unconfidently, Asahina-san let out a big sigh and hugged her body.

It was already half past six.

There is a serious restriction on us now.

That is, we cannot let the other Asahina-san and Haruhi see me together with this Asahina-san. If we are seen by Haruhi, we could argue our way out. But if Asahina-san (the true one) saw her doppleganger, I am sure her brain isn't so dumb as to be able to believe there is someone that looks exactly like her walking around. Worst case scenario, I bump into all of the just-dismissed SOS Brigade on their way home. That would be ungodly.

Then again, if I trust what Asahina-san (the one from eight days in the future) said, she didn't see herself these past couple days, so there shouldn't be a problem there.

But there is a problem. If my hard work here results in the future being easier on me, I should work extremely hard here. I can't be too optimistic… Is that the problem?

I have no idea. Why are things always so inconvenient for me? Anyway, if the traveler this time wasn't Asahina-san (Eight Days Later) but Asahina-san (Big), everything would be solved in no time.

I stared at the slight senpai by my side.

Wearing a North High uniform, she scrunched her body together, looking very cold. In this chilly February wind, it must be hard to stand not having a jacket. If I was wearing that uniform, I would probably freeze to death too.

“Should we get going?”

I waved a hand toward the old bike and asked. Asahina-san nodded her head.

“But, where are we going? Kyon-kun's house?”

Even though I wish we could do that, the fewer people who we have to tell not to tell anybody else, the better. As her brother, I can honestly say that my sister has the loosest lips ever. In fact, they're probably looser than a grandmother's pursestring in front of her grandson.

“To someone besides Nagato who can take you in temporarily. Maybe that person will let you stay without asking any questions.”

I got on the bicycle and urged the startled Asahina-san on. I carried the light, second-year student sitting sideways on the back and started in the direction of our destination.

Where I stopped the bike was a place every person in the SOS Brigade would recognize.

Of course, that means Asahina-san knows it too.

“Here… Um, this can't be it.”

Asahina-san, having jumped down off the bike, was staring at the front gate to that person's property.

I set up the bike stand and locked it.

“This person will help Asahina-san no matter what happens. There will never be a time when this person won't help out.”

“B-But, we shouldn't reveal the secret——”

“Leave it to me.”

The huge golden gate had a modern intercom plastered on the side. Before I press the button, we need to smooth a few things out.

“Asahina-san, ear.”

“Okay.”

Obediently, she tilted her head and brushed off some of her hair, exposing her pretty ear. Without meaning to, I thought of Haruhi and her ear-biting scene. I want to do that as well, but I can tell it's a bad time.

“Ye-Yeah. I want to do that too…”

Asahina-san blinked and said in a whispery voice,

“Eh. But, I'm not a good actress.”

She protests, looking like she's about to cry.

“That's so hard…”

Yes. She has to play the part exactly.

To tell you the truth, I feel that there is no need for acting. Asahina-san just has to act like the normal Asahina-san. I'm sure no one will notice.

“Anyway, that's the plan. It'll be fine.”

I smiled at her optimistically and pushed down the button.

“……”

“……”

Asahina-san and I silently waited for a response. The chance of the actual person replying is actually very small, so in my mind, I practiced the exchange. After I repeated it three times, a minute later, still no one had answered. They should be home. This started turning into an unlucky day, when,

“Oy, wait a minute!”

A large, energetic yell came out of the wall, followed by a big bang. This was succeeded by many creaking sounds as the wooden gate was opening.

“Ya! What's happened this late at night? Mikuru and Kyon-kun. Hm? It is really you two. Oh, boy, that's not easy. Lucky you,”

Tsuruya-san said with a huge smile on her face.

Tsuruya-san's outfit is a bit different from the normal one I see at school.

She was wearing a casual civilian kimono with a short shirt on top, her long, flowing hair combed back. She fits right into a traditional Japanese garden.

Tsuruya-san let us into the Tsuruya property, then put the squared timber bar back on the inside of the closed gate.

“Hm, but this is surprising. Kyon-kun and Mikuru out for a walk? Haruhi didn't come?”

“There are many hidden stories in this… Wait, Tsuruya-san, how did you know it was us?”

Since no one had answered the intercom.

“En, there's a security camera installed out there. I can tell right away who the visitors are! After seeing you two, I thought it would be best to come out myself. Is something wrong?”

Tsuruya-san's geta made a clip-clop sound as we walked to the main door that opened up to reveal a path resembling a shrine courtyard. She walked while smiling and said,

“Hm? Mikuru? What's wrong, you seem so lethargic today.”

“Actually, about this.”

I cleared my throat and prepared to speak the lines of the script I had come up with.

“I have a request to ask of you. Can you let this Asahina-san stay at Tsuruya-san's house for a while?”

“Huh? I guess I could.”

Fufu-n, Tsuruya-san let a laugh out through her nose, then proceeded to stare at Asahina-san's face.

“Hmm, it is… Mikuru, right?”

Asahina-san jumped. Tsuruya-san's bright eyes narrowed. Have we been found out?

“Meh, whatever. There's a reason, right? A reason why Mikuru can't go back to her own house.”

The conversation was progressing really fast. It was a great help.

“How long does she need to stay for?”

“Eight days max,” I said.

Not counting today, eight days later Asahina-san will revert to her old self.

“Can she?”

“En, it's not a problem. Ah, yes. You can live in the separate quarters. Everything that was in the quarters at that villa is there as well. No one is currently residing there, but sometimes I go there to ponder a question alone. It's a good, quiet place.”

I gazed around at the Tsuruya residence surrounded by trees. It was wide enough to feel like there was nothing it didn't have. I even heard that there was an antique warehouse around here too.

I am surprised by, admire, and envy them. Tsuruya-san's mouth became a beautiful semi-circle while she stared at Asahina-san.

“But, Mikuru, what's wrong? So weird—— You don't need to be so alarmed.”

Tsuruya-san poked Asahina-san's lowered chin.

“She doesn't seem like Mikuru at all.”

Before the motionless Asahina-san could say something and incriminate herself, I interrupted.

“That person is Asahina-san's twin, Asahina Michiru.”

“Twin? Sister? Michiru-chan?”

“Uh… yeah. They became separated after birth…”

“Eh——?”

“Um, every family has a problem. Asahina-san… I mean Mikuru doesn't know she has a sister.”

“Ha——. But why is Michiru-chan wearing a North High uniform?”

“Ah.”

Shit. I didn't think of that.

“How should I explain this… Ah, that's right. This Michiru-chan, she wanted to see her sister, so she got a North High uniform from somewhere. But, she didn't succeed and started to leave. Then I bumped into her and listened to her story. U——m, then…”

She patted my shoulder.

“That's good.”

Seeming extremely happy, Tsuruya-san said,

“If you were to start explaining, both the explainer and the listener would become tired. If she is Mikuru-chan's sister, they would definitely look alike. Do you only need to let her live here?”

“And you can't tell Asahina-san about her.”

“Obviously. I got it.”

“Um…”

As if not wanting to be ignored, Asahina-san piped up.

“Can I really stay? Tsu, Tsuruya-san.”

“En. Of course you can. Come, Michiru, this way, this way, I'll take you to the place.”

Tsuruya-san pulled on Asahina-san's hand, yanking her towards the Japanese garden. Before that, she shot me a gaze, and I couldn't help but feel like I was shot.

The separate quarters look almost exactly the same as those at the villa up in that mountain. According to Tsuruya-san, those were built using this for reference. Which means this is the original, kind of like a relative with the same last name. It's an extremely comfortable place.

Sitting on the Tatami Mats in this simple hut, Asahina-san resembled a marionette.

It's a good thing Tsuruya-san turned on the heater and the room was heating up, because I wouldn't have wanted to move otherwise.

Tsuruya-san explained the closets and drawers in the room and where the bedding was, and then with a, “I'll bring some hot tea,” she started to walk towards the main house.

“It's finally calm now,” I said.

“Yes, she's a very big help. We have to thank Tsuruya-san someday.”

Here the Asahina-san changed into Asahina Michiru approved,

“Michiru. That's not a bad name.”

She finally smiled.

On the Tatami mats, I stretched out my legs and looked at the antique lights. And then thought about Asahina-san's name.

Until Tsuruya-san returned laden down with teacups, a kettle, and a basket of clothes.

Tsuruya-san invited me to stay for dinner, but eating out two days in a row was sure to make my mother angry, so I expressed my disappointment and said I would have to leave. Perhaps it was because I had found a place for Asahina-san to stay, but I seemed to have lost my energy. If it kept going like this, I would end up sleeping out too.

I left Asahina-san in the solitary quarters and walked out. Tsuruya-san followed, pretending to be seeing me off. This was what she said.

“Michiru, she resembles Mikuru but she isn't Mikuru. In other words, there's a feeling that she is Mikuru, but also a feeling she isn't, you know? Oh, yeah. She's different from the one I met at school, right?”

I already said they were twins, Senpai.

“Ahaha~. Yes. That's how it is.”

Walking about a step and a half ahead of me, Tsuruya-san led me towards the main gate.

Looking at that swaying bun of hair, I knew I had to ask.

“Tsuruya-san.”

“What's the matter?”

“What do you actually know? Asahina-san and Nagato————The people of the SOS Brigade aren't normal, you said before.”

“Mhm.”

The long hair jumped. She turned her head. Her smiling face was bright even for a star.

“Kyon-kun, I actually don't understand very much, but I'm sure they're different. At least, different from me and you. They're not the 'normal' friends.”

Knowing that is good enough. Tsuruya-san will not ask for unnecessary details, and she definitely won't go looking for what Asahina-san truly is.

“Why?”

Tsuruya-san retracted her hands into the sleeves of her shirt and started to laugh.

“Me, I will become very happy just watching someone being very happy. I like people who eat meals they cooked themselves with very big mouthfuls. I don't care if it's someone I've never seen before. Un, so when I see Haru-nyan I feel very lucky. Even though I don't know why she's like that, but she's always especially happy!”

Do you want to join them or something? Aren't you lonely just watching from the side?

“U——n, me, I feel that many movies I see have a deep meaning, but I don't ever want to film my own movie. Seeing's enough for me. Whether it's the World Baseball Championship or the Pro Bowlers Association World Championship, I always warmly cheer them on. But I never think, 'Uwah~ I want to play that too!' and join them. Just watching those people do their best makes me have a good mood already. Anyway, that doesn't interest me! So, I should just do what I can do!”

No matter what I say, this is the exact opposite of Haruhi. If there's something interesting happening, she'll join in every time, since she has to try it herself no matter what.

Tsuruya-san continuously rotated her eyes.

“Like that, when I see Mikuru and Haru-nyan and Yuki-ni and Koizumi-kun and Kyon-kun, I think it's lots of fun. I like the appearance that everybody's busy! Apart from that, I also like the me standing off to the side watching you!”

An impossible to replicate smile and sound. She was speaking her heart. Just standing by her side, I felt happier.

"So I like where I am right now. I think Haru-nyan knows as well, so she hasn't tried to drag me in. There's five people, it must be crowded already.

Tsuruya-san jumped again. She turned back to face the front door, towing her long hair behind.

“It's impossible to find out every secret for every thing on this planet. I'm busy enough with my own devices as it is.”

She turned her head around and said something I'll never forget.

“Kyon-kun, you have to work hard. The future of mankind rests on you!”

Said Tsuruya-san. The corners of her mouth slightly moved, and she stared at me for a while. Then, as if she couldn't hold it in any longer, she started to laugh. From that benevolent, child-like laughter, I got the feeling this cheerful Senpai's words were just a joke.

Tsuruya-san continued to laugh until her belly hurt. Then, she wiped the side of her eyes and said,

“Well, Mikuru will always follow you! But, don't be mischievous. That's the one thing that's not allowed. If you wish to be mischievous, do it to Haru-nyan. Just my intuition. Mhm, I'm sure she'll always forgive you!”

This should be the only serious part of her speech. Don't know why, but I just had a thought like that. I didn't actually plan on doing anything.

After saying good night to Tsuruya-san, I rode away on my bike. But after a while, I had to stop.

”Good evening."

Because a person walked out of the shadows. And blocked my path.

“You worked hard. I don't quite approve of involving Tsuruya-san. But for safety, there's not a place safer than that.”

It's been two days since I saw this impeccable, smiling face. It was Koizumi Itsuki's honest, handsome, smiling face.

“Yo, what a random encounter.”

“You could say that. I guess. Random encounters have happened since you and I first met. No, you met Suzumiya-san first.”

As if greeting me, Koizumi raised his hand. Were you hiding there waiting for me in the dead of the night? If anyone mistook you for a mental pervert, they would report you to the police. It's not like you can deny it.

Fu~, Koizumi softly laughed.

“You look like you're doing something important. Not involving me again?”

I sighed. The air I exhaled turned white.

“This is Asahina-san's and my problem. It has nothing to do with you. Can't you just go play with your and be happy with that?”

“Those haven't appeared in a long time. I like to take walks like this from time to time too.”

You're not very creative, taking a walk in the middle of a cold night without a dog. Even though I said this, you appearing here isn't a random thing, is it?

“If it was by chance, that's too much of a coincidence, isn't it?”

“What do you want?”

After I asked this, the topic changed completely.

“Iya, if I said it now, you would probably understand everything. What do you know as of right now?”

“Does it have anything to do with the two Asahina-sans?”

After Koizumi pointed out the important points,

“And then, how did you explain it to Tsuruya-san? Said they were twins? Is it possible she believed it?”

“I think both worked.”

“I suppose. It's because the other person's Tsuruya-san.”

He said it very naturally. Who the devil is Tsuruya-san? That cheery Senpai seems like she knows everything, yet keeps a subtle distance between us and her.

“My superiors told me not to harm Tsuruya-san.”

Koizumi then seriously said,

“She actually has nothing to do with this. Originally she wasn't supposed to come into contact with us, but something went wrong somewhere, and we met each other. You could say, 'good job, Suzumiya-san'.”

Where did it start to go wrong? When Tsuruya-san ended up in Asahina-san's class? Or when we got her to play baseball with us?

“We do not inhibit her, and vice versa, she does not interfere with what we do. That's the deal the Tsuruya family and the 'Organization' have going on right now.”

Don't just calmly say something so surprising.

Kuku, Koizumi went,

“Just so you know, the Tsuruya family is one of the 'Organization's many supporters. But they don't care at all about what we do, and they don't mind us whatever we do. It's easy to be relaxed like this. But Tsuruya-san is probably the successor to the Tsuruya house.”

Tsuruya-san, you… I think we even kindly said she wasn't of importance sometime back then too. I want to know from the bottom of my heart. Who is she?

“An ordinary senior high student. She goes to the same public school as us, and she is a second-year living in a big house. Perhaps she's battling evil in a place we don't know about, and maybe she solved something extremely important, but this has nothing to do with us.”

I still remember what Tsuruya-san said to me clear as day. She said she was very happy not being closely connected to us. We should be like that too, and treat her as if nothing's different. Who she is, what she's here to do, that's not important at all. Just like how Haruhi's just Haruhi, Tsuruya-san's just Tsuruya-san. She's just the energetic, vigorous friend of Asahina-san. An honorary member of the SOS Brigade. This should be the best explanation.

But for her and Asahina-san to be friends, how much of it wasn't chance? Is there even a past the time travelers don't know? Haruhi obviously doesn't understand…

As I thought this, I suddenly remembered.

“Koizumi, last time, you said Asahina-san would be fine no matter what. What's with that?”

“Because the future can be changed too.”

He looked like he was expecting me to ask.

“Maybe you think that time travelers can meddle freely in affairs in the past, and firmly believe that the future is superior to the past. In reality, the future is a very fuzzy subject.”

So if you understand the foundation of the past and reverse time, you could change everything at will. In fact, that's what I did. I fixed that alternate world with the strange Nagato.

Koizumi slightly smiled.

“Changing and fixing things from the past works. If you know the future first, then you should theoretically change the future from that time.”

“How are you going to know the future. That's impossible.”

“Do you really think that?”

Koizumi's smile looks a little evil. He probably wants it like that. This guy has the weirdest hobbies.

“I am an esper, even though my abilities change depending on where I am. But, can you be sure there are no others? Why are you so quick to say that no one can possibly have powers that aren't only used to keep the in check, powers that are more easily seen? For example, what if there was a fortune-teller, and that person wasn't part of our 'Organization'?”

He reverted to his usual smile.

“I don't remember telling you that those kind of people don't exist.”

You…!

“Of course, I never said they did, either.”

So do they exist or not? And don't tell me that both are possible.

“To tell you the truth, I don't know. Didn't I tell you, I'm one of the lowest ranked people. I can't know everything. Like Asahina-san.”

This I accept. There's not a more unfortunate agent than Asahina-san.

“There’s a reason for not letting her know, of course. If a time traveler were to know their purpose in the past, they would inevitably analyze that purpose, and carefully plan their next actions, fearing to jeopardize their own future. This is why although Asahina-san is a time traveler, she doesn’t know anything about her true purpose here. She has been intentionally kept in the dark. This is the future’s countermeasure to ensure that the past, be it their own past selves or others native to that time plane like you and me, does not analyze their reasons and act

unaccordingly, putting the future at risk. So all we know about Asahina-san is that she is required to remain in this time plane. If we were to successfully discover why she is here, it would be a very grave situation for the future. Therefore, the future takes great care to ensure that the only thing we can conclude is that she's a beautiful representative from the future. I do not feel threatened by her now, but in a crisis, I believe that she will act based on her orders from the future."

Koizumi smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe that's the point of her being here, to make us think that's the point. So the 'Organization' doesn't do anything hastily. If we do act, and it turns out to be what the future wants, we will be extremely annoyed. Letting her be the future's puppet just isn't good."

Wait, so does that mean you and Asahina-san are opponents?

"Can't really say we're hostile. In a nutshell, it's just a steady condition."

My body froze up. Literally.

"I'll make a comparison. Here are two countries, A and B. Both are a thorn in the other's side, but they've never directly fought before. Now, before A appears nemesis C and before B appears nemesis D. For A, they cannot co-exist with C, and are bitter enemies. Same with B versus D. Finally, C and D create an alliance and work together. If there were only one enemy they could take them, but their army would have no influence against two countries. So, the proverb 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' proves to be true. A and B are like rivals that find themselves back-to-back and reluctantly fight together against a common enemy. That's kind of like this, is it not?"

Koizumi looked at me suspiciously.

"Are you listening?"

"Ah, sorry."

I sat on my bike seat.

"I lost track when you got to something about D. I remember a bit about what you said at first, but nothing after D, since there's just way too much."

"You should've heard me. Whether or not you processed it is up to your brain and how you want to think about it."

Don't reply so seriously. I'm all confused now. I recommend trying stand-up or something someday. If you don't have a sense of humor, no girls will like you even if you do look handsome.

Koizumi smiled again. I wonder how many different faces you have.

“I will change my expression because of the time, the circumstance and the other person. But if the other person is you, all talks turn into this type of talk.”

You're a headache-inducing person.

“I think so too, but I'll stay like this for the time being.”

For some reason, Koizumi looked off into the distance.

“Someday, I'll be able to be your friend normally, and we will look back on past events as a joke together. I hope such a day comes. A day where missions and duties are irrelevant, but normal things apply.”

You would be satisfied with that?

“Well, I'll see you later in the clubroom.”

As if saluting, he raised his hand and turned around. Then he disappeared into the curtain of night like he was walking around aimlessly after a stroll.

After I returned home, I hurriedly ate a bit and slipped into my room.

Next I phoned Nagato. I have to tell her that Asahina-san is now staying in Tsuruya-san's house. Even Koizumi noticed it, it's possible Nagato already knows.

After three rings, Nagato picked up the phone. She knew who it was, the proof being that she didn't say anything.

“……”

“Nagato, it's me. I'll cut the chit-chat. This is about Asahina-san.”

While telling her the main points about what happened with Asahina-san, Nagato listened to me explain with a '……'.

“Understood.”

She lightly said. It sounded like she wasn't reluctant at all. Then she added.

“I feel very well.”

“I see. In that case, I'm relieved.”

“Why?”

You even asked why. I was even worrying about Nagato feeling regret. It was a one-sided request to begin with, and now Asahina-san just leaves on a whim. That's kind of selfish.

“Unnecessary worrying,”

Nagato tranquilly said,

“I understand what she means.”

A pause.

“I've never thought about wanting to be like her. But, her thinking that is logical.”

What can I say?

“If I were her, I might think like that too.”

Um, that means, Asahina-san worrying about Nagato, Nagato can see that from Asahina-san's point of view?

Silence for a while, then,

“I think so.”

The volume was very soft. I instantly regretted not turning on the voice recording function, so as to record this happy sound.

After that, a couple more lines and I hung up the phone. There's nothing to worry about. It seems the alien and the time traveler have come to a mutual understanding. Maybe this kind of mutual understanding even surpassed their imagination.

For some unknown reason, I let my gaze slide sideways. Shamisen is lying on the bed, sleeping. Like a human, his head is on my pillow, and he sleeps very nicely. In case Haruhi actually comes to my house, I think of cutting away some of his fur, but then I remember something.

“How long does lying about Shamisen have to go on?”

I forgot to ask. Asahina-san should know when I was absent and when I was there. I want to know when I return. After I know that, I have a basic knowledge of how the week is going to go. But Asahina-san from a week later didn't bring anything, not even her cell phone. If I'm going to phone, it would have to be to Tsuruya-san. But maybe it's because of what Koizumi said, I don't really want to contact her right now. I don't even know what's true of what he said. That bastard, he can even rationally explain things on the spur of the moment. Maybe he just looked at my face and thought, 'Well, that works too.'

I picked up the remote control and adjusted the temperature, then rested my head on my bed.

Tomorrow, I'll go check my shoe locker and then figure out what to do.

I looked at the three-colored cat, whose mouth was opening and closing slightly, and slowly closed my eyes. Without meaning to, I fell asleep. And then I was awakened by a sister who had just finished taking a bath.

Chapter 3

The next day.

“Please scale the mountain. There you will encounter an oddly shaped rock. Move this rock approximately three meters to the west and leave it there. Asahina Mikuru knows what to do. Since it will be pitch dark after nightfall, it is advised that you go there before the sun sets.”

After tearing open yet another letter in the washroom, I was once again greeted with more strange instructions. Similar to yesterday’s letter, there were strange scribbles beneath it, and the word “rock” was circled, as if emphasizing that specific word.

So I decided that today I would head straight back home.

“Even though it’s fine with me…”

But what in the world was this? Rocks atop mountains? What mountain? What rock? The only mountain I had heard from Asahina-san recently was…

I started to feel my head spin.

“That damned treasure hunt.”

According to Asahina-san, we would spend our holidays treasure-hunting. And that would be the day after tomorrow. Tsuruya-san was said to have a mountain behind her house, and if that was so, she would still be involved. That girl bought the story of the two Asahina-sans without question, as she continued to smile before me and Haruhi. That’s what worries me the most. Even if it was a sticky matter for Koizumi, I could still ignore it for the time being, and that’s exactly what I did.

“So that means that Haruhi should be back to her usual self soon.”

I walked to the classroom as I predicted her reaction. The map was currently in Tsuruya-san’s possession, and two days later we would be on a treasure hunt. That means that Haruhi would probably obtain this map within two days time, most likely tomorrow. I hadn’t detected any sense of excitement in Tsuruya-san last evening. Does this mean that she hadn’t found the map yet? Or was she just keeping quiet? Knowing Tsuruya-san, she would be one to give me the map for safe keeping, and tell me to pass it to Haruhi, if she had already found it.

“Hey, Haruhi.”

Just as I expected, she was already in the classroom, still as quiet as Nagato, like a normal high school student full of melancholy.

“How’s Shamisen?”

She didn't even bother to look at me as she continued to stare outside the window. She didn't look too happy.

"Oh, he's still okay."

"Is that so? Well, that's good I guess."

Her breath condensed on the window and made it cloudy. Using her index finger, she began tracing patterns on the window.

That's weird. Being able to have a normal conversation like this with Haruhi is even more rare than seeing Nagato not reading in the club room. This makes me feel anxious, as if some unknown peril might be slowly creeping up on me. It couldn't be the doing of some unknown aliens, could it?

"What's the matter? You look down."

Haruhi snorted in reply.

"What are you talking about? I've always been like this. It's just that I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. Tomor…"

Just as I was expecting her to go on, she abruptly shut her mouth and stared at me.

"You're one to ask. Not coming to the club room again today?"

Haruhi revealed a face that clearly said, 'It doesn't matter whether you come or not.' I don't care, though. To me, it's a great opportunity to chat with her.

"Shamisen's easily bored. And since I can't entrust him to my sister, I'll have to take full responsibility of taking him to the vet again."

"Hmm, I think that's great."

Even more surprising was that even though Haruhi wore a scowl on her face, I could sense that she was in a pretty good mood.

"When you're sick, it's only natural to rely on someone. When he's all better, be sure to take him out to play. I also wish to play with a fully recovered Shamisen soon."

To Haruhi, Shamisen might have very well have become a brigade member already. Asking me to take care of him and then bring him out when she feels like playing with him, that's Haruhi for you, all right. Still, I think it would be a good experience for both Shamisen and me to let him go over to her place for a week.

"I'll think about it."

Looking up at the sky, Haruhi once again began blowing at the window pane.

Since everyone wishes for lessons to end faster anyways, I didn't feel how slow the flow of time really was.

All I did was silently pray under my breath that my teachers won't ask me to answer any questions, as I mechanically flipped the pages, not paying attention to what was going on. Thinking back about it, it was normal to showcase such behavior. Even though it wasn't a good thing to do, and was probably the reason why my grades suffered so phenomenally, it was nevertheless typical. Feeling dread about the troublesome things I had to do after school, I consoled myself by thinking about how bad Taniguchi's results were compared to mine. Hey, give me a break already.

I placed my textbooks in my desk's drawer, knowing that they would very well gather dust in my room anyway. My bag felt remarkably lighter, as I made my way out of the class room. Just then, Taniguchi, who was on class duty, patted my shoulder and said,

"Yo, Kyon."

For some reason, Taniguchi looked at me with eyes that had seemed to have lost their light. I didn't have the time to be fooling around with him. Asahina-san was waiting for me. If he understood what I was feeling, he would have let me go.

But Taniguchi stood there as if blocking the door, and pointed the broom he was holding towards me.

"How I admire you."

There was an air of spite in his voice. I racked my brain as I thought of what could have possibly inspired his admiration. I couldn't find anything.

"Is that so?" Taniguchi replied slowly, and sighed.

I wonder if Haruhi's melancholy had affected Taniguchi, too. Maybe it was some kind of sickness that could be transferred via the air.

"Hey, Taniguchi."

Kunikida suddenly appeared and stared at Taniguchi's face.

"You look like someone who just got dumped by his girlfriend, looking very depressed lately. What's the matter? Don't tell me you two really did break up."

Kunikida asked while busy operating the vacuum cleaner.

“Is that so, is that so…?”

I smiled as I patted Taniguchi’s back. Speaking of his girlfriend, I heard it was some girl from Kouyouen he got to know during Christmas. Unfortunately, I was busy eating Haruhi’s hot pot during Christmas, so too bad, Taniguchi.

“Seeing your face, it looks like you got dumped. I see, I see.”

“This can’t be.”

My friend, who had obviously been fishing for sympathy earlier on, put on another depressed face as the broom fell from his hands. It was painfully clear that he was still very sad.

“You should get going, you’re disturbing my cleaning.”

Kunikida forced out a sympathetic smile.

“Even if it hurts, I’m sure that it’s only a matter of time, Taniguchi. Pardon me for being honest, but even though I never once met your girlfriend, from your words I could tell that she wasn’t really serious from the start.”

“How could you know if the both of you have never met? Oh, forget it. It’s not like I was expecting you to understand anyway—-”

“Truthfully speaking, don’t you think it’s a bit too weird to become lovers before the two of you even started off as friends?”

“Bah, don’t mention this anymore. I really want to get over it as soon as possible.”

I really wanted to stay, just to see how a typical high school drama unfolds in real life. Unfortunately for me, real life does not permit me to stay here any longer, and I needed to take my leave soon.

“Oh well, don’t think about it too much. A good lad like you will surely meet a fine lass one of these days. Until then, just be patient!”

After making my statement, I hurried out of the classroom before Taniguchi could think of a reply. At least I tried to console him. I’m not that kind of guy that would make fun of someone who just got dumped. Truthfully speaking, I really sympathize with you, but at the same time, I’m relieved to see one of my good buddies once again come back to accompany me at the starting line. Let’s try harder in the future, okay?

But why did he admire me so?

As I opened my shoe locker, I suddenly thought of many things. If Taniguchi's melancholy was due to love, could the same thing be said for Haruhi too? If Taniguchi was acting all melancholic because of the end of his love life, could Haruhi be acting the same due to her lack of one?

Thinking about this, I suddenly felt scared, before I laughed out loud to myself.

"Impossible."

Thinking that Haruhi's melancholy was due to love problems was just plain stupid. The possibility of that happening was roughly equal to me being selected to join the national baseball league. And even if it did happen, I wouldn't be happy, just like the current situation. Even if it was totally unrelated to my current problems, I wanted to know what Haruhi was really thinking. It was hard to imagine a world without Haruhi, who was presumably sulking alone in the club room beside the heater right now.

"Just forget it."

Now is not the time to be thinking of such things. I mean, it's Haruhi we're talking about. She'll be okay in no time. If she knew about our treasure hunt, she'd be in high spirits instantly. Since I already knew what was going to happen, there was no need to worry anymore. Nor was there any need to try to find out any further. Because there was always the possibility of making a mistake, and endangering the entire SOS Brigade in the process. Just like a harmless germ, if exposed to laser radiation, it might very well mutate into some life-threatening organism. Even though I could learn a lot from this specific "germ", the risks of it mutating were too high, and therefore I decided it was best to leave it alone. Was it the right choice to play it safe, or a foolish decision to forsake the opportunity to find out more? There's only a blurry line between what's right and what's wrong.

"I'll just do what I can for the future before me, before worrying about the distant future."

Someone once said that the only thing certain about the future is the uncertainty it brings. But for me, there was something sure about the future, and that was that Asahina-san existed, and therefore so did the future.

After returning home briefly, I got on to my trusty bike, and pedaled all the way to Tsuruya-san's mansion.

What I had in mind was to telephone Tsuruya-san's house, and tell Asahina-san to come out and meet me. But since Tsuruya-san wasn't home yet, things were a little tricky. I thought of asking one of Tsuruya-san's maids to relay my message to Asahina-san, but after thinking that it would probably take a long time for me to get my message through, and an even longer time for them to relay it, I gave up upon the idea. Unable to decide, I finally telephoned the Tsuruya residence, and decided to just let the future play itself out.

It was, as I expected, one of Tsuruya-san's maids who picked up the phone. It seemed that Asahina-san was already expecting my call, as the maid didn't ask any further question other than what my name was. Before I even said "Hello" to Asahina-san, she said, "I'll go and meet you right away. Please wait for me," as if totally understanding what I wanted to say. If she happened to become my secretary in the future, I'm sure she would display a great deal of potential.

Just like Tsuruya-san, Asahina-san was a respectable sempai. Instead of conveying everything through the phone, why shouldn't I just let Asahina-san read the message? That would save me a lot of time trying to explain to her the various symbols. Now why hadn't I thought of that earlier?

Within my pockets were the said letter and a flashlight, just in case something happened. Because I had been to Tsuruya-san's house too many times for me to remember, I instinctively knew where to go. Even though it wasn't snowing, knowing the cold February, it would probably snow any time soon. While my ears and nose were turning numb from the cold winter wind, I continued to pedal furiously, until I finally reached Tsuruya-san's house.

Asahina-san's face emerged cautiously from between the doors.

"Kyon-kun."

Asahina-san let out a relieved smile, as she stepped out from Tsuruya-san's house. She wasn't dressed in her sailor uniform like she was yesterday. Instead, she was dressed in long pants and a thick, furry jacket.

"I borrowed some clothes from Tsuruya-san."

As if noticing my blank stare, Asahina-san tightened her collar, and said:

"Because I can't go back home to retrieve my own clothes."

"So you have no memory of losing clothes?"

I asked stupidly while sitting on my bike. It was painfully obvious, but that was all I could think of at that moment.

Asahina-san didn't look too good, as she said,

"Erm… I can't really remember if I lost any garments… Because I never once thought of going through them to search if any of them went missing… Even if I did lose some I doubt I would notice… But that's not to say that I have too many outfits to choose from… umm…"

You need not worry too much. If it were me, I wouldn't have noticed if a pair of my pants suddenly went missing and even if I did, I couldn't go around blindly accusing people of stealing

them. If that really did happen, all I would do was stay quiet. Not like I would really mind anyway.

I gently looked at Asahina-san. It doesn't matter whether those clothes are yours or not, anything would look great on you.

"N-No… T-There's no such thing…"

Asahina-san shook her hands in embarrassment.

"The sleeves are too long for me, and…"

Asahina-san reached for her chest, and gently laid her fingers on them. Her face blushed bright red, as her movements stopped.

"I-I-I-It's okay… R-Really… Ahahahaha!"

After a moment of silence, my heart finally calmed down. Tsuruya-san may have had longer hands and feet, as well as a taller figure, but on Asahina-san, there were also places that were too tight. At one glance, anyone could see which part was too small for Asahina-san. I knew that beneath the jacket lay a hot figure. It was too bad that I couldn't see it without the jacket. But then again, I was sure that I would be able to in the future.

I took out the letter I found in my shoe locker this morning.

"It seems that this time we have to do it no matter what. Do you know why?"

Scale a mountain. Move a rock. This seemed like those RPGs, where the main character would be given a rather pointless mission, without any explanation why he had to do it. And there wasn't any mentioning of what he would obtain should he follow the instructions given either. Worse, there wasn't any guarantee that even if the hero did oblige, he would obtain something good.

"Hmm… Is it that mountain? It's the only mountain I know. Oddly-shaped rock? Rocks… Hmm… Ah, could it be…?"

Asahina-san softly muttered to herself while she read the letter, which was gently caressed by the wind. She was thinking aloud, just like a little lost mouse who had forgotten the way back to his little hole.

"I have a general idea of where we're supposed to go. It should be the site of the treasure hunt. In other words, it's the only place I know."

I nodded. It made sense.

"But, what should we do?"

Obviously, I had no clue. But I did have an idea.

“Asahina-san, did we really not find anything?”

“Yes… I mean, no, we didn’t.”

My hands were slowly turning numb from the cold. Asahina-san folded the letter, and I suddenly felt uneasy. What was this feeling?

“Doesn’t it seem strange? No matter how you look at it, this order has something to do with treasure hunting.”

“W-Well…”

Asahina-san lowered her head.

“What does this mean? Hmm…”

Not knowing whether ignorance is bliss or not knowing anything was not good, Asahina-san shook her head and looked at me.

“I still can’t seem to make out anything. I guess it’s best that we head to the mountain. Maybe I’ll remember something there…”

“That makes sense.”

Anyhow, we should first head there to have a look. Haruhi would undoubtedly be unhappy if she were to find out that I’d been there ahead of her, but I suppose that I could always pretend that I’d never been to the place before, should she ask.

I got onto my bike, and persuaded Asahina-san to sit behind me. Afraid of falling off, Asahina-san wrapped her hands tightly around my waist. I suddenly recalled last night.

“What’s the matter?”

Asahina-san asked me softly, just as I was identifying left and right.

“Nah, it’s nothing.”

I replied simply, as I began pedaling. My mind, however, was silently thinking about something else.

Was that guy last night Koizumi? Or was it merely someone who looked like him? I hadn’t really got a good glance at him, and it was dark too.

I shunned those thoughts from of my mind, and continued to head for the mountain.

Maybe it was due to Tsuruya-san's mansion being too big, but I soon lost all sense of direction.

Tsuruya-san's private mountain was located east of North High. Instead of being called a mountain, it should be called a hill, as it wasn't really as high as a mountain above sea level. As I scanned the area around me, I was disappointed to not find any monuments left behind by some ancient civilization. Looking up high, all I could see were trees, trees, and more trees. Be it a mountain, a cliff, a dune, or a sleeping volcano, scaling it was no easy task. The same could be said for this hill. There were no specially-made paths for ascension. It would take equal amounts of time and energy to ascend or descend, or simply put, to go up and down the hill. Even a grizzly bear would feel tired climbing this steep hill.

"It's this place all right. Let's start climbing."

Following Asahina-san's directions, I silently pushed my bike uphill, and scaled the hill. The sun was already beginning to set. As I looked down, vast vegetable fields came into view, but there wasn't a single soul in sight.

"Are you sure it's all right to just climb someone else's mountain? We're technically trespassing on private property you know."

I said as I wearily made my way to the top of the hill. Asahina-san suddenly let out a soft laugh. "Tsuruya-san said it's all right. Kyaa~ That's what I heard her say a few days ago… Oh no, wait… That should be tomorrow… She should be telling you this tomorrow."

I felt as if I had finally grasped the situation. It may seem like the past to Asahina-san, but to me it was the future. I only hoped that she would shed more light on what I should do.

"Erm… That's all I can tell you for now… The treasure hunt and city patrol should happen pretty soon now…"

Then what about the lucky draw?

"A-Ah… T-That…"

Asahina-san was immediately thrown into a state of panic, as she blushed furiously. Hmm, anything else?

"W-Well… T-That…"

Was Asahina-san panicking because she was hiding something? Classified information?

"Y-Yes! That's it, classified information… Well, at least classified for now."

From the look on her face, I couldn't feel any sense of superiority at all. Even though I didn't know if she knew about any big, cataclysmic secrets about the future, I was confident that she at least knew about some events from the recent future, events that she was concealing from me. So does that mean that the only one who knows absolutely nothing is Asahina-san (Mikuru)? Gah this is frustrating. If put in inequalities, it would probably be:

Asahina-san (Big) > Asahina-san (Michiru) > Asahina-san (Mikuru)

I sighed loudly. Upon hearing this, Asahina-san became even more anxious than before.

"Erm… Kyon-kun…?"

Asahina-san said with her back faced to me. From her voice, I was sure that her eyes were filled with tears. If she stared at me with those pitiful eyes, I was sure that I couldn't answer her question calmly. I admit that I had no evil intentions at that time, but even so, my mind was filled with immense feelings of love that had somehow exploded out from somewhere and were fast overfilling my soul. My face crumpled like Shamisen's belly under her magical touch, as I forced myself to say:

"Oh, it's all right, there's no need to worry. Even if you don't say anything, I think I'll understand everything in a few days time."

If what Asahina-san said was true, then I would know everything after eight days. To her it seemed like the past, but in reality it was my future. I could know everything that would happen within these 8 days if I were to ask Asahina-san, but then again, I would still know what would happen even if I didn't ask her. All I needed to do was wait. Time will tell, or so they say. Now if time didn't tell, wouldn't that be stranger still?

"Let's finish what we're here for before nightfall."

I said as I gently placed my arms around Asahina-san's shoulders. Asahina-san looked at me with puppy-like eyes, and slowly nodded her head.

"Oh, okay. Let me lead the way. We need to go further up, before we start climbing."

So, the both of us hiked through the dense jungles. I had originally planned to take the lead, hacking away at the dangerous twigs and tree roots, but after taking into consideration that Asahina-san might slip and roll downhill anytime, I quickly changed my mind. Since it was still winter, all snakes of any sort would be busy hibernating, so I guess it wasn't that dangerous after all. This way, even if Asahina-san were to slip, I would be able to catch her in my arms and protect her.

"A-Ah… Oops…"

No matter how you look at it, Asahina-san + steep mountain always equals danger. Add to the above equation that this was no ordinary mountain, and you get the picture. While scaling a

mountain, one would usually zigzag along like a snake, but due to excessive stones and tree branches, things were more complicated than usual.

I lost count of how many times Asahina-san nearly slipped and fell. Even though I had to arch my back to protect her, a smile was always on my face whenever that happened. We were walking in a mountain unfit for humans, no doubt, but no matter where we went, there was always a "correct" path leading deeper into the mountains. By "path" I mean a route that wild beasts probably also found better to follow. But even so, I was happy. If this were a "normal" mountain, then there wouldn't be any need for Asahina-san to walk in front of me, would there?

After a good ten minutes of walking, a small, even patch of land soon came into view.

"Yes, this is the place. Even though it's been dug like this, the stone's still here."

Asahina-san panted, as she arched her back and placed her hands on her knees.

I followed suit, standing beside Asahina-san.

"Huh?"

There were various slopes on the mountain, but this was the first time I had come across flat land. There was thick overgrowth growing everywhere, save a small patch of land that was shaped like a semi-circle, no larger than 10 meters in diameter. The grass there was sparse, and from the looks of it, it was as if someone had shaved away a whole part of the mountain via a landslide long long ago. It didn't seem like it had happened recently.

After our breathing returned to normal, I looked at the direction Asahina-san was pointing at.

"If it's a rock we're talking about, I think it's that one… It looks exactly the same as the one in the drawing…"

"A gourd shaped rock."

A… rock?

"Erm, isn't that a little too big to be called a rock?

And aren't you exaggerating too much? How is this any bit identical to the drawing? If it weren't for Asahina-san, even if I searched till sunrise, I doubt I would have spotted it.

"Well, it does slightly resemble a gourd…"

The rock was not evenly shaped. The side facing me was flat, so from my point of view, it resembled a turtle's back more than a gourd. And due to the excessive overgrowth surrounding the rock, it was hard to make it out from its surroundings. It was no easy task spotting this rock, all right.

I double-checked the orders on the letter.

“Shift this rock three meters to the west, eh?”

It had already begun to turn dark. If we stayed here any longer, things might turn dangerous. After all, who knew what lingered in these woods? Plus, if we were to slip as we made our way down, the both of us would inevitably be pulled down the mountain, so I knew I had to make pace.

I passed my flashlight to Asahina-san and asked her to help me illuminate my surroundings. Here’s to hoping that I can manage to lift this rock up.

“Damn, this is heavy.”

That wasn’t all. Only after I had begun lifting the rock up did I realize that one third of it was still buried in the ground. This has officially broken the definitions of “rock”. It should be labeled as “boulder” instead.

After much effort, I finally managed to hoist the rock out of the ground. Only then did I realize that it really did resemble a gourd. It was only because one third of it was buried in the ground that I failed to notice.

I once again lifted the rock, and headed to my west. Pulling with all my strength, I made four giant paces to my right. That should be around three meters.

“I think you’re slightly beyond three meters.”

Asahina-san said as she pointed at the rock. From her point of view, she should have a better estimate of how far three meters was.

“That’s it. Just place it there.”

After following Asahina-san’s instructions, I placed the rock down on the ground, as it made a thundering noise, before sinking deeper into the ground. That should allow it to resume its original posture.

“That rock… It’s standing…”

Asahina-san said through surprised eyes.

“Just like… A symbol…”

I looked at the rock I had just moved.

A symbol.

From this angle, the strange rock was really obvious. What kind of rock it was, this I had no idea, all I knew was that it was snow-white. This snow-white stone, standing in the midst of pure darkness, was really a sight to behold. A white, gourd-shaped rock. If I were to spread the word, I'm sure many would think of it as some ancient ruin.

"Asahina-san, don't tell me Haruhi plans to dig beneath this rock?"

"Yes. The ones who will do the digging would be Kyon-kun and Koizumi-kun."

And we didn't find anything? Honest?

"Yes."

Asahina-san said as she lowered her head, "There were no treasures or the sort…"

I sighed as I clapped my filthy hands together.

Then, what was I doing now? Come to think of it, I had been following strange orders for two days in a row. Yesterday it was the prank, and to top it off, someone actually fell for it. Why we did that, even Asahina-san didn't know. The only person who probably knew what was going on would be Asahina-san (Big). I have to remember to ask her why, should I meet her again. The next time something like this happens again, I'll definitely not play along.

I once again looked at the rock. There was something not right about it. The rock had originally slanted towards its side, thus it was only natural that half of it be covered with dirt. Since I had just removed it from the ground, there was a huge, glaring portion that was dirty, while the other half of it was sparkling clean. It was painfully obvious that someone had just moved it not long ago.

"That crater is too obvious; anyone would realize it."

The "crater" was where the rock originally was. The soil there was a dark black, and curved inward. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together.

"How was the crater like when you last visited the mountain?"

Asahina-san revealed an expression that appeared to be deep in thought.

"Erm… Since no one said anything, I myself didn't notice it. The only one who talked was Suzumiya-san, and all she did was talk about digging holes…"

If so, let's just ignore the plot holes for the time being, and see what can we do to minimize the errors.

Asahina-san and I searched for dry twigs, vines and leaves, before placing them atop the crater. After we had filled the crater, the both of us took turns stamping on it. The results were far from

convincing, since it had taken the rock years of weathering to achieve such conditions, but it was better than nothing.

The sky was already rapidly darkening, and soon we had trouble seeing even if we squinted our eyes. I decided to call it a day.

“Let’s head back home, Asahina-san.”

This time, it was I who took the lead. I was grateful that I remembered to bring along a flashlight. The ancients once feared the darkness and worshiped the light like a divine entity. Now, thanks to modern day science, there was no longer the need to do so, as I carried the divine entity in my own hands.

Compared to scaling the mountain, heading down was a breeze. There were many times Asahina-san missed her footing, and each time she stumbled, she would cling on to me for her dear life. Not that I’m complaining or anything.

By the time we had reached the foot of the mountain, it was truly nightfall. Both of us sighed simultaneously.

“Ah,”

Asahina-san said as she looked upwards towards the sky.

“It’s raining.”

Within five minutes, the small drizzle had already escalated into a downpour.

Riding my bike as fast as I could, with Asahina-san sitting behind me, I sped towards Tsuruya-san’s residence. At first, I was really grateful for such an opportunity to befall me. Riding down a slope on a bike in the rain, with a goddess behind me, what’s there not to be grateful about?

Barely halfway towards Tsuruya-san’s house, however, I felt as if I had only one third of my energy left. As I pedaled furiously in the rain, Tsuruya-san’s house finally came into sight. It was only then did I notice someone was already there awaiting us.

“Aha, welcome back nyoro~”

Just like yesterday, Tsuruya-san was dressed in a long kimono, as she carried an umbrella above her head, smiling energetically as she opened the door, awaiting our return.

“Where have the both of you been? Ah forget it; it must be due to some reason that you can’t tell me, right? Don’t worry, I’m not such a busybody anyways. Why, Miku—- I mean, Michiru, you’re filthy all over! Let’s go take a bath, shall we?”

Tsuruya-san said the above in a single breath.

“It’s cold outside, isn’t it? Come on in and have a bath first! That’s right, a bath! Kyon, would you like to join us too? I’ll scrub your back for you nyoro~”

Even though I was moved by the suggestion, I knew that Tsuruya-san was just pulling my leg. Haruhi loved to blurt out some serious suggestions while putting on a look that suggested she was just kidding. Tsuruya-san, on the other hand, loved to crack out jokes while putting on a straight face.

“I think I’ll head home. Well, please take care of Asahina Michiru for me.”

As I turned to leave, Tsuruya-san caught hold of my sleeve.

“Wait just a second.”

Tsuruya-san said as she reached for her lap.

“Here is something I promised Haruhi. Would you please hand it over to her?”

Tsuruya-san produced a thick sheet of curled up paper. Studying it carefully, I noticed that it was made out of ancient, Japanese paper, so old and worn out that it resembled a papyrus. There were mosquito bites all over it too. It didn’t take a genius to find out that this was the “treasure map” in question.

“What’s this?”

I asked, playing along.

“Erm, it’s a treasure map.”

Tsuruya-san replied, just as I expected.

“It’s an ancient custom that all treasure maps be kept in rattan cages. I happened to stumble upon this one not long ago. I’ve wanted to pass it to Haruhi for quite some time now, but for some reason I keep forgetting to do so.”

Is it okay to just give away a treasure map? I mean, it’s buried treasure, Tsuruya-san. TREASURE.

“It’s all right. I couldn’t be bothered to hike all the way up some old mountain just to spend half a day there digging. If there really is treasure buried there, all I want is one tenth of the entire lot.

God knows how long that treasure has been buried! Based on ancient records, the treasure was left by one of my ancestors who particularly liked to play tricks. This might be a trick conceived by that devious old trickster to fool us descendants. After digging for half a day, only to not find anything, that sounds like a grand trick he would pull to fool stupid humans!"

It looks like we're the "stupid humans" in question here.

"But look on the bright side. There's a chance that something is really buried there."

I tried my best to put on a face that seemed as if I was honored, as I took the map from Tsuruya-san. It was something that Tsuruya-san had dug up especially for us, but somehow, I didn't feel the least bit thrilled.

"Be sure to pass that to Haruhi, okay?"

Tsuruya-san said as she winked at me, before laughing madly. Asahina-san had a stoic expression on her face, as she alternated her glance between the treasure map and me. Upon noticing that I was staring straight at her, she lowered her head.

What's going on? I wanted to question out loudly. What was it with the treasure hunt? Why was Asahina-san sent back to the past? Did it have any connection with the treasure hunt? I'll be damned if it doesn't. It seemed to me that this treasure hunt was nothing but good news, both to me and Asahina-san.

"Ah, Kyon, take this umbrella. Be sure to watch your step, okay? Bye bye!"

Tsuruya-san said as she waved wildly, before disappearing together with Asahina-san into that huge mansion of hers.

All that was left was me, standing in the midst of the rain, with an umbrella above my head, along with a crumpled roll of parchment.

For some reason, I wanted to take a shower, no, a bath. I felt a sense of immense loneliness. Was it due to someone as cheerful as Tsuruya-san suddenly leaving my side? I felt as if a ceremony had ended… or something like that.

"It's cold out here."

I placed the umbrella on my shivering shoulders as I started to pedal back home.

Be it Haruhi, Asahina-san or even Nagato, each of them had the power to drive me nuts.

"Gah, I'm hungry."

I didn't meet Koizumi this time on my way back home. That's too bad, because if I did, I would definitely do what he likes to do the most – talk.

The day the other Asahina-san showed up in the broom closet, the clouds were already beginning to move far north. Today, the weather was pretty pleasant. It wasn't too cold, but it wasn't too hot either.

As usual, I climbed up the slope to school, and due to the nice weather, I felt thoroughly warm as I reached the gates of North High. Compared to the usual weather, where I would barely break a sweat after being cooped up in a heatless class room, today was much better.

After walking past the school gates, and promptly the school doors, I arrived at my shoe locker. Before opening it, I drew a deep breath. I had a strange feeling of foreboding. I knew that my "orders" from the future would continue, and so I dreaded opening the shoe locker. I knew that once I opened it, a letter would be readily awaiting me, a letter that was delivered by God-knows-who, during God-knows-when. But there wasn't a choice, was there? I needed to open the shoe locker to change my shoes, after all.

As I expected, there was a letter in there.

Alongside two identical letters.

"You can't be serious, Asahina-san…"

Once again, the letters were typed out using clear font. On each of the letters were the numbers #3, #4 and #6, along with the letters "three", "four" and… "six"?

"So does that mean the previous two were #1 and #2? And the first note was number zero?"

But why did the numbers skip to six right after four? Where was number five? Was it a typo?

I stuffed all three letters into my pocket, and charged towards the washroom. I was beginning to get used to this routine already.

Inside the washroom, I opened each and every one of those letters according to their numbers.

There wasn't much time to the bell, so I briefly read each of those letters, before heading out of the cubicle, and looking straight into the mirror. From my reflection, I could see the weird expression plastered on my face.

What in the world was Asahina-san (Big) trying to say? No, before that, what purpose did sending an unknown man to the hospital and moving an unknown rock have? I greatly wanted to know what would happen next.

Wearing a mystified expression on my face, I entered the classroom, only to find a girl who couldn't calm down waiting for me.

“Kyon!”

The girl that ran towards me while shouting out my name would be Suzumiya Haruhi, who was up until yesterday still in a fit of melancholy.

“Hurry up and show it to me!”

For a moment, I wondered what to show Haruhi, who was flashing me her million-watt trademark smile.

“Don’t tell me you forgot all about it? That thing Tsuruya-san asked you to safeguard? How could you forget something so important?”

The sudden change in Haruhi’s mood surprised me completely. There was absolutely no trace of melancholy left in her already. What happened to the melancholic, soft-spoken you that sat behind me yesterday? Don’t tell me that was an impostor I met yesterday?

“What are you mumbling about? I’m always like this. Where else in the world would you find someone like me?”

Haruhi said airily as she swept her hair upwards, smiling brightly at the same time.

“Come on, stop fooling around. Let me have a look at that thing right now! If you’ve forgotten it, let’s hurry up and take a cab back home to retrieve it!”

All right, all right, I get it. Just settle down for a moment. Everyone in class is starting to look at the both of us now. Geez, and here I was wishing for a normal school life.

“Such a boring goal should be placed onto a paper airplane and flown down from the school roof. An attractive lifestyle or even a socially-withdrawn hikkikomori would be better than your so-called ‘normal’, boring lifestyle. And if you’re going to talk about your life, please do that only three seconds before you die.”

I don’t think my life can be condensed into three seconds of speech, nor do I intend to live one that is able to. Sighing, I reached into my bag and withdrew the roll of parchment. Unsurprisingly, it vanished from my clutches two seconds later.

Unwinding the scroll at superhuman speed, Haruhi asked me,

“Have you read it already?”

“No.”

“Really?”

Yes. From the moment it reached my hands, there wasn’t any intention at all to open it.

“But it’s a treasure map, for crying out loud! Doesn’t the sound of buried treasure get you all excited?”

What’s there to be excited about treasure that I know I won’t be able to find? All that awaits me atop that mountain is a backache, and if things are worse, a couple of bruises and sprains. What I wanted to hear was Haruhi’s reason for her excitement. All I had in mind while I pocketed Tsuruya-san’s “gift” was to hand it over to Haruhi. There wasn’t the least bit interest in digging up some ancient buried treasure. Truthfully speaking, I really wanted to tell Haruhi, ‘Hey, let’s just forget all about this treasure hunting business, okay?’, but alas, Haruhi was already busy studying the map.

“Humph, Tsuruya-san shouldn’t have done that. She should have handed it straight to me, instead of giving it to you for safekeeping. Even though it would mean that I would be able to get my hands on the map sooner, I would have preferred it if she gave it to me as a surprise…”

Haruhi said as she turned her back towards me and headed back to her seat. She then proceeded to take out her pencil case and textbooks to use them as paperweights, as she once again studied the map closely.

I too headed back towards my seat, a renewed sense of curiosity springing up within me.

“Hey, Haruhi.”

“What is it?”

Haruhi said as she flicked her eyes upwards.

“How did you know that Tsuruya-san passed the map to me?”

“Tsuruya-san phoned me yesterday.”

Haruhi replied, this time not even bothering to look up at me.

“You took Shamisen for a walk, didn’t you? You passed by Tsuruya-san’s house as you took him for a walk, that’s how she passed the map to you. It seems that Shamisen is feeling better already, that’s good news!”

It was probably Tsuruya-san who had thought of that lie. I’ve never heard of anybody bringing a cat out for a walk amidst this cold weather, and to top it off, it was raining last night. For you to believe such lousy lies, what are you thinking about, Haruhi?

I pretended to look serious, and acted as if nothing even happened. Haruhi looked as if the school had announced that today was a holiday, as her eyes shone with excitement. “Look, Kyon, this must be where the treasure is buried! It says so right here!”

My gaze fell on the map, which was lying on Haruhi’s table.

The map was so old, it could probably be sold to a museum as an antique. There were numerous sentences written in black ink, before being signed with a large signature. I gave up trying to decipher the writings, as I looked at the drawings beneath it. There was a mountain, which was no doubt the one I had scaled yesterday, and probably would scale again tomorrow. The map was drawn using black ink, and was very simple, but it succeeded in describing the looks of the mountain perfectly. The words were probably written in ancient writing, but to me, it seemed more like an alien textbook than a map. I probably wouldn't understand these rich pieces of literature anyway.

Haruhi probably did, however, as she translated it out loud to me:

"On this mountain, there is something very valuable, something that only my descendants may acquire. It is something that I am sure would make them happy. Whoever seeks the treasure, please dig here."

Beneath the text was signed: "15 Genroku, Tsuruya."

I had no idea which ancestor this was to Tsuruya-san, but he sure did a lot of redundant stuff. What was so important that it required it to be buried in the ground? If it was really as Tsuruya-san said, wouldn't this be a great prank that escalated over the centuries? It was already several hundred years since the Genroku period. Surely someone in the Tsuruya house must have already dug the treasure up by now?

"Where on Earth is the treasure buried?"

Haruhi said to the uninterested me as she traced her finger all over the map.

"It isn't stated anywhere in here, and there's no 'X' sign either! Even though we know it's a mountain, we still don't know where to search!"

"Oh, forget it."

Haruhi looked at me, clearly stressed by the ordeal.

"If we put our hearts into it, I'm sure we'll manage to find it."

Who do you mean by 'we'? Are you going to rally the townsfolk?

"Of course not, stupid." Haruhi said as she rolled the map back to its original state, before tying a knot and putting it safely on her desk.

"It's just the few of us, of course! You're in charge of distributing the tasks. Or are you not satisfied with that?"

If I really had a choice, I would have chosen to not participate in this stupid event. I didn't even know how many tasks there were, or who should I assign each task to. Just as my heart was sighing, the bell rang, as the homeroom teacher Okabe-sensei stepped into class.

"Meet in the clubroom after class."

Haruhi said as she poked my back with her mechanical pencil.

"I want you to keep this a secret from everyone else. Let it be a surprise. When I announce my find, I want you to pretend to be shocked, too. If only Tsuruya-san had…"

Haruhi's voice began to grow louder, but her voice was drowned out by the sound of all the other students standing up and paying respect to the teacher.

Someone please tell me how the heck do you pay attention in class! I'll admit that I'm an easily distracted person, so if anyone has a way to memorize everything being said in class, please let me know. It doesn't matter if it's only half of what's being taught, it's always better than not knowing anything at all. I know that notes are the way to go, but even so, there must be some catch to being able to sit down quietly and take down notes. Anyone know the trick here?

This is what someone once told me: "There's no need to pay attention in class, all you have to do is not think about anything else unrelated to class," or something of the sort. In other words, all I had to do was to not think of anything else. Since my ears would definitely be bored by then, they would have no choice but to listen to what the teacher had to say, and hence I would be able to understand what the teacher was trying to convey. It seems logical, right?

Well, I guess it's worth a shot. After all, the one who had passed down this sacred technique to me was none other than Haruhi herself and it was probably a technique from the long-lost Hiten-Haruhi-Ryu.

The catch was this: I was fine with not paying attention in class, but it was almost impossible to not think of anything else, and even if I did, would life be happy that way? I don't think Haruhi would want to lead that kind of boring, mundane life. As I started to gradually doubt her words, I suddenly recalled that her results were top notch, a huge contrast with reality.

Trying not to think of anything else right now was plainly futile. Admittedly, I had one less problem to worry about now thanks to that scroll of old parchment. Haruhi's melancholy had magically evaporated after receiving that old map, thus saving the world from huge blue giants was something that I did not need to worry about.

What I did need to think about, though, were those three letters from Asahina-san (Big). It was something that concerned both Asahina-san (Future) and me, something that we needed to accomplish before the designated day. It wasn't something that I could idle about, and even if I

were to rush out of the classroom right now, it would be the first thing on my mind that I had to accomplish…

Gah, with such thoughts in mind, how can you blame me for not understanding what the teacher had to say?

After school, Haruhi forcefully dragged me into the club room, just like a fish being dragged away by a fisherman's net.

Thanks to Tsuruya-san, I couldn't use Shamisen as an excuse to skip club activities anymore. And since I had no other matters today, I was forced to follow her into the club room.

The orders from the future explicitly stated that I would be very free for today and for tomorrow. It was only the day after tomorrow, and the day after that, that I would be very busy. It was easy to see why. There were two days of holidays, followed by a Sunday, making it a consecutive three days without the need to go to school. And since there was an extra day that students didn't need to come to school because of the entrance exams, it meant that I would have a long, four day holiday period.

Time travelers seemed to like using shoe lockers as mailboxes. Was there a problem with handing the letters directly to me? I had many questions to ask Asahina-san (Big), after all.

I had thought of the above problems while I was in class, and I hadn't thought of a solution even as I now gradually approached the literature club.

"Yo! Sorry for the wait!"

With an energetic shout, Haruhi pushed open the doors to the club room, while dragging me by the collar. For some reason, I felt extremely nostalgic at that gesture, as if I hadn't experienced it in a long, long time. Perhaps it was due to my three days absence from the club room. Even if it was only three days, I had started to miss this place like an old exile yearning for his homeland. Once I entered the club room, I felt like I was finally back home.

Trying to shake off these weird feelings, I closed the doors that Haruhi had conveniently left open, and looked at each brigade member's face.

The first person I saw was the sailor-uniform clad first year, who was sitting in the corner reading a book, just like always.

Nagato looked at Haruhi and me with her expressionless poker face, before turning back to her book. No extra gestures or "welcome back" speeches, this was the Nagato I had come to know, the goddess silently sitting in a corner of the club room reading a book.

"Hey, long time no see."

Sitting by the table and playing with a carom board all by himself was Koizumi, the one who always wore a smile, and whose words you never knew when to trust. “How’s Shamisen-One? If it’s possible, I would like to arrange for one of my friend’s relatives to see him. You see, my friend’s relative in question operates an animal clinic, and I’ve heard it’s a very good one.”

Like I’m going to buy that. It’s not like the first day I’ve met you anyway.

“Hmm, it seems that you’ve got many friends in various fields, Koizumi.”

Koizumi gently flicked a carom piece with his finger. “That’s how legends are created, right? From the friends I’ve known, and from the friends my friends have known, the only friends I don’t have are…”

Koizumi gracefully retraced his hands and said elegantly, as if rehearsing for a play:

“People who are not native to this world.”

Come off it. I’ve already known of aliens, time travelers and espers. With such a wide social circle, I really think I’m better off not knowing of any sliders, because the appearance of one would be sure to give me a headache.

Koizumi gave me a soft laugh, signaling the end of our conversation. Even Haruhi had begun to turn her head in our direction in amusement.

“I heard that there would be a meeting today.”

“Yes, you’re right. An emergency meeting, for that matter.”

Haruhi said as she took her place by the Brigade Commander’s table.

“Mikuru-chan, tea.”

“Okay.”

With a pitter-patter, Asahina-san came running to Haruhi dressed in her cute maid uniform. It was Asahina-san, all right.

Wait, that’s strange. Shouldn’t it only be natural that I see Asahina-san here at the club room? Hmm…

“Erm…” I stuttered.

It seems that I need some time to reorganize the cluttered thoughts in my brain. The Asahina-san standing here is different from the current Asahina-san sitting in Tsuruya-san’s house. This is not the Asahina-san from further in the future, but rather the Asahina-san from the closer future.

“Erm… Kyon-kun…”

Asahina-san said while clumsily filling the kettle with hot water. She looked at me with a look of concern. It was exactly the same look that the other Asahina-san had given me three days ago. Wait, that’s to be expected since they’re one and the same. Oh, what am I saying? I pushed those thoughts out of my mind as I braced myself for what Asahina-san had to say.

“How’s Shamisen? Was he sick because we brought him to a place too cold for him when it was already cold enough outside?”

“Well, no…”

I could finally confirm that this Asahina-san knew nothing about the future, or at least, until… Erm… The evening five days later. After that, she would probably have to face an entire set of ordeals.

How do you put it, it was already meant to be? Gah, this is annoying.

“Shamisen’s already okay. He’s been better since yesterday, seeing that he was already rolling around energetically by that time.”

“Is that so? That’s just great.”

Asahina-san said as she revealed a beautiful smile. Seeing this made me even more uneasy. Shamisen’s illness was just a big fat lie, this I’m sure Asahina-san (Michiru) knew. But since she didn’t say anything, this Asahina-san probably had no clue it was just a lie. I felt as if I had betrayed her trust, and had a sudden sense to apologize to her immediately.

“Let me play with him a little bit more. Shamisen’s just so cute.”

There’s nothing cuter than you. Even if you were locked in some dark corner of the Milky Way for five hundred years, you would still be just as cute. But if you’re going to use Shamisen as an excuse to come visit my home, you’re more than welcome. Besides, Shamisen has been frequently bringing that black cat he calls his girlfriend back home lately. Maybe they were using visiting me as an excuse?

“Ah, well… That’s just fine… Ah!”

Asahina-san yelped as she suddenly jumped.

“The tea spilled…”

Overflowed would be the word. Since she was too busy talking with me about Shamisen, Asahina-san hadn’t noticed that the kettle was already full. However, this seemed to suit Haruhi’s “clumsy maid” idea, as she looked at Asahina-san with her arms crossed, apparently glad at the sight of her cleaning up the spilled tea.

I pulled out one of those steel folding chairs, and took my seat by Koizumi's side. Haruhi radiated an aura of superiority, but was oddly quiet, as if she had wanted to wait until we had all settled down before making her grand announcement.

"Sorry for the wait."

Asahina-san said as she placed two steaming cups of tea onto the tray, before handing them to both me and Haruhi. I had a feeling that Haruhi would wait until I had finished drinking my tea before making her announcement, since she had no intention of standing up. After downing her steaming tea, Haruhi leaned back on her chair as she turned the computer on, and while waiting for the computer to boot, flipped some magazines on the table. Both of us locked eyes once in a while, and every time we did so, she would have a different expression on her face. She would sometimes seem strict and sometimes laugh evilly. Talk about having a hundred faces. Was this the dreaded calm before the storm?

Koizumi had an expression that suggested he knew nothing at all, as he reorganized the pieces on the carom board. Nagato had the same expression from the start – which is to say none at all. Asahina-san was busy preparing the second round of tea. Everything seemed like how it used to be, so normal, so… Perfect. That was what made it seem odd. What was it that made Haruhi decide to just let time pass like this? What about the treasure hunt?

After a few minutes of fruitless thinking, I decided to not think about it, and let my mind wander wherever it liked.

Not long afterwards, that brief moment of peace was broken. It wasn't by Haruhi's shouting, or by announcements forcing students to go home, but by a series of knocks on the front door. "Yes, here it is! Come in!"

Haruhi yelled in response to the knockings, as she stood up from the chair at bullet speed.

"I've been waiting for you! Please, do come in!"

It was rare to see the Brigade Commander open the door for anyone, especially for a guest.

"Aha, it's Mikuru-chan and the other Brigade members! Long time no see! Oh wait, Kyon, we just met yesterday! Shamisen's such a playful little thing, next time be sure to bring him over to play!"

Tsuruya-san shouted loudly as she entered. Placing her arms around Haruhi's shoulders, the both of them began to dance wildly. Here we go again.

"Hmm, that's it. The map. It should be an ancient treasure around 300 years old, probably some old Genroku period coins. It would be great if we could find it!"

Tsuruya-san announced loudly as she sat by the table and began chewing down the prawn crackers that were served on the table.

“This old, worn out paper is one of my family heirlooms. The buried treasure in question could be anything at all. That day, after cleaning up the store room, I found this priceless piece of treasure buried under a bunch of worthless trash, rattan case still intact ~nyoro!”

After spitting out each and every one of those words at bullet-train speed, Tsuruya-san downed Asahina-san’s tea, stood up, and pointed at the whiteboard.

The old map was pinned down by its edges by four large magnets. Standing nearby the board was Haruhi, who was busy scratching her back with a cane and had a very pleased look on her face.

“This mountain used to be government property before it came into my family’s possession. We shouldn’t take my ancestor’s words lightly! Something must be buried there, right? Oh, great ancestor…”

Tsuruya-san clasped her hands together and bowed towards the setting sun. Haruhi took this opportunity to tap the whiteboard with her cane.

“That is it.”

That is it? Right now, all I’ve heard is Tsuruya-san explaining the map’s history.

“And that’s all. Why her ancestor left this great treasure to her, and what it contains, are up to us to discover. I hereby forbid any one of you to reveal this matter to anyone outside the SOS Brigade, save Tsuruya-san.”

Haruhi said with her mouth opened wide, revealing a row of snow-white teeth.

“Tomorrow we shall set out to search for buried treasure! If we continue dilly-dallying, someone else might just go and dig it all up, so tomorrow we meet at the usual spot at nine sharp! Let’s head for the mountains! And don’t worry, leave the equipment to me.”

Needless to say, I wasn’t the least bit surprised. Three days ago, I had heard of the entire treasure hunt from Asahina-san. Yesterday, Tsuruya-san gave me the map for safe keeping. This morning, I had again heard of the treasure hunt from Haruhi. I really have no faith that I’ll be able to pull off a shocked face. I guess it can’t be helped then. Placing the empty teacup by my lips, I pretended to continue drinking my already finished tea.

I guess there wasn’t a need for that, for the only person who was shocked…

“E-Eh, t-treasure hunting? T-Tomorrow? Up a h-hill? T-Then we’ll n-need bentos…”

…was Asahina-san.

Nagato looked up at Haruhi with her book still placed open in her lap.

“Hmm… We might make a great discovery that will further propel the reaches of archeology. I can’t wait!”

As always, Koizumi was the first one to kiss Haruhi’s ass.

If Haruhi wanted looks of extreme shock plastered on everyone’s face, she would have been sorely disappointed. Tell you the truth, I don’t think anyone was surprised, not even Asahina-san.

“That’s the spirit! If we really do find buried treasure, we’ll split everything up into equal portions! Of course, Tsuruya-san who has kindly provided us the map will receive a share of our treasure too.”

“That’s great!!”

Tsuruya-san shouted energetically.

“If we do find gold or the sort, I suppose I could give you guys 90% of the entire loot. Since my great great great great great grand father lived during the Genroku period, the only thing that would be able to make his grand children happy even after a few hundred years would probably be gold. I’d like to make the best of his good intentions, but unfortunately, I have something to attend to tomorrow, so I’ll leave the treasure hunting to you guys.”

For some reason, Tsuruya-san’s gaze seemed oddly weird to me at that moment. Just after she shifted her gaze from me, Asahina-san looked at me and laughed. It seemed that Tsuruya-san had kept her promise after all. The most she would do was probably communicate with Asahina-san via body language. There was no way she would tell Asahina-san the truth. I can’t go on suspecting Tsuruya-san like this.

However…

For someone that was unrelated to the SOS Brigade, Tsuruya-san seemed oddly involved, be it the baseball tournament or the snow mountain. But that was only because we asked her to. This time, though, she had approached Haruhi willingly, as if wanting to keep close ties with us. There was no way of knowing what was going on in her head. Don’t tell me this is another scheme she cooked up just to make Haruhi happy. But come to think of it, why would she want to make Haruhi happy? Just for fun and laughter?

Let’s first cast my suspicions about Tsuruya-san, who was merrily chewing on the prawn crackers laid on the table while making a face that suggested she had successfully pulled a prank, aside.

The one who was making an even weirder expression was Koizumi. Come to think of it, Tsuruya-san had visited the club room quite often, but I had no memory of Koizumi meeting her

there. Tsuruya-san's wave of a hand could very well equal an order from the "Organization". To be in such close quarters with someone of such high superiority must be troubling, Koizumi.

And…

I slowly thought of my shadowy conversation with Koizumi that night before, as I stared right into his generic smile. Although I had no idea which parts of his conversation were genuine and which parts weren't, I had a feeling that the house of Tsuruya and the "Organization" were closely tied. Heck, Tsuruya-san's mansion may very well be the secret headquarters of Koizumi's "Organization". Tsuruya-san and Koizumi may not be working for the same faction, but they were definitely tied to each other, this I could tell. What their relationship was, and how superior Tsuruya-san was to Koizumi, this I had no clue.

Tsuruya-san appeared to have no idea of Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san's true identities. Although she could tell that the three of them —- and Haruhi, for that matter —- were not ordinary humans, she apparently didn't poke or pry for more information, at least not openly. I strongly believe what Tsuruya-san had said that day before at her mansion, and also bits of what Koizumi had said. "Leave the troublesome things to the Organization", eh? It's just like Nagato locking her synchronization abilities.

"… Kyon! Are you listening?!"

A shrill cry pierced my ears, as I found myself staring into the sharp tip of a cane. Glancing up the cane, I found Haruhi's angry face awaiting me.

"Listen up, tomorrow be sure to dress plainly! All of you should wear clothes that you don't mind getting dirty. As for Kyon and Koizumi, the both of you can come empty handed. Here's a list of the things we need."

Haruhi barked at Asahina-san to fetch a marker.

Still dressed in her maid outfit, Asahina-san hurriedly fetched a marker and began writing down everything Haruhi had said with child-like enthusiasm.

"First we'll need two steel shovels, but you can leave this to me. Next, we'll need bentos. Mikuru-chan, you know what to do. Then we'll require compasses, flashlights and a map. No, not the treasure map, but a real, accurate map of Japan. Oh, and if possible, please remember to prepare emergency canned food, and a flare launcher too.

Which mountain are you planning to climb? This isn't even a mountain, it's barely a hill. Unless we run into some strange phenomena again, like a sudden snowstorm, we should be all right. And if by chance we really did run into some strange phenomena, what use would compasses and flare launchers be of? The incident that happened during the end of last year suddenly came into mind.

Nagato's black pupils were fixed directly on Asahina-san's neat writing. As I confirmed what was on the board, I couldn't help but sigh.

From what Asahina-san (Michiru) said, there was no need to bring any flare launchers or emergency canned food, since we would be back peacefully. Heck, there was no need to climb that darned mountain either, since we would come back empty-handed. However, Asahina-san had told me to take care, as something important would happen then. I wonder what it was.

Going up a hill, savoring Asahina-san's bentos, and going down the hill sounds like a picnic to me. Oh and there would be an extra "workout" session for Koizumi and me too.

I knew without a doubt that it would be boring. Maybe it would have been better if I hadn't asked Asahina-san about it. But alas, I had to do it in order to maintain the delicate balance between the past and the future, since it was decided a long time ago that the SOS Brigade would have an activity this weekend.

Now going on that stupid treasure hunt just for the sake of maintaining the balance, this I can understand. What Asahina-san (Big)'s orders were for, however, this I could not fathom. I was sure that Asahina-san (Michiru) didn't understand them either. Oh whatever. If put in terms of loss and gain, we would probably end up with a neutral zero anyway – the loss would balance out the gain.

Wait a second. I think the loss outweighs the gain.

Trying very hard to keep my emotions in check, I sat at the table without uttering a single word.

Haruhi, who was by now completely obsessed with mountains, was still busy adding items to the already massive list of equipment. The entire white board was so full that Asahina-san was having a hard time squeezing in the items Haruhi mentioned.

"Haruhi, we're not planning to scale the Himalayas. The most we'd probably need is a GPS tracker. It would enable us to communicate with the outer world in terms of danger, and make rescue operations swifter by pin-pointing our exact location."

Tsuruya-san laughed as she said, "I remember that I used to run around that mountain when I was young. It's perfectly safe ~nyoro! There aren't even grizzly bears there!"

Haruhi flashed Tsuruya-san a smile as she replied: "Thanks a lot, Tsuruya-san. We'll be counting on you should we run into any trouble."

So you weren't serious about all that stuff after all?

Haruhi spun the cane in her hand as she said,

"Everyone, I think that's all for the preparations. We should definitely work harder for Tsuruya-san's sake, and unearth the great treasure her great-grand-ancestor left for us!"

For some strange reason, I felt oddly calm. Perhaps it was due to Haruhi's melancholy disappearing as she once again looked at me with those bright, sparkling eyes. I felt strangely at peace with myself, as if all feelings of anxiety had suddenly evaporated. But was that all? Why in the world would I feel so relaxed even though I knew I would go on a fruitless treasure hunt tomorrow?

Oh well, I can't afford to put too much thought into it. As long as it makes me feel better, who cares what the reason is.

Haruhi must have decided on this treasure hunt long before the meeting, as she had borrowed an entire lot of books, brochures and even novels about the warring periods. According to Tsuruya-san, her ancestor was also filthy rich (I think he was the village chief or a famous salesman). Having nothing better to do, we all began speculating as to what the buried treasure could have been.

Actually, our "speculation" was no more than simple discussion and guess work, but before we knew it, an hour had already passed, and so today's emergency meeting came to a close.

And since we're on the topic of speculations, Haruhi's speculations were "If it were really some old Genroku period coins, I would be bored beyond belief! Let's all hope it's something interesting!" and that kind of mumbo-jumbo.

When Nagato shut her book tight, all of us knew that it was time for today's activities to come to a close. All of us brigade members, together with Tsuruya-san, then proceeded to make our way back home. As we walked down the hill, I tried valiantly to start a conversation with Tsuruya-san, but to no avail. Haruhi and Tsuruya-san were both walking up front, as they energetically discussed about the mountain. Shortly behind them was Asahina-san, followed by the silent Nagato, before ending with me and Koizumi at the back. I had wanted to ask Tsuruya-san about how Asahina-san (Michiru) was doing, but I didn't want Haruhi to overhear it.

Ah, forget it. I'll have to call Asahina-san later anyway. And since none of those three letters could be conveyed fully through speech, it was only logical that I pay her a visit, seeing that one of those letters required us to do a little preparation. Thinking about this, I felt as if acid had burned a large hole through my wallet. It always seemed that there was only cash flowing out; none ever flowed in.

I was really impressed with Tsuruya-san. Her ability to strike up conversations with Haruhi and Asahina-san, while not spilling the beans about how an exact double was sitting right in her house, was just remarkable. I guess that's to be expected of Tsuruya-san. So that's what it's like to be a sempai, huh.

As Nagato's apartment loomed near, I knew that it was time to say goodbye, seeing that this was the regular spot where SOS Brigade members parted.

“See you guys tomorrow! The last one to arrive will be punished!”

Waving furiously, Haruhi said her goodbyes, as each of us headed in our separate directions. Now all that was left was to fake going home.

I walked until I was far beyond anyone’s sight before I took out my cell phone. Just to be safe, I hid in one of those dark alleys behind houses as I punched in Tsuruya-san’s residence number.

After notifying the maid of my name, Asahina-san was put on the line shortly after.

“Hello, Kyon-kun? It’s me.”

I thought of Asahina-san’s figure as she sat alone in Tsuruya-san’s large residence.

“I got more of those things again. You know, the letters?”

“Umm, yeah… What are we supposed to do this time…?”

From the way she ended her sentence, I could tell that she was very nervous.

“Well, about that, I thought that maybe it would be better if you and I had a little chat about it, since it states that I’ll be free for today and tomorrow. I’m going to be really busy after that, though.”

“Oh… It’s all right, I understand…”

So what do I do next?

“There’s another city-wide search on Saturday and Sunday. If memory serves me right, you were acting pretty strange then, Kyon-kun…”

I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear that. I’ll probably be really tired after tomorrow, so I don’t think I’ll have enough energy remaining to force myself to act weird.

“We’ll talk about this later. I’ll head over to your place right now. Tsuruya-san should be home any time now.”

After that, I hung up, as I quickened my pace to Tsuruya-san’s residence, ushered on by the piercing cold winter wind.

The person to answer the doorbell today was yet again Tsuruya-san. She was still clad in her sailor uniform, apparently not even bothered to change as she reached home.

“I had a feeling you would come.”

Tsuruya-san said as she waved at me while opening the door, revealing a large grin on her face.

“What are you planning to do? She can’t be staring at my house’s ceiling forever you know.”

Well, I know it sounds weird, but please bear with it for a few more days. Asahina-san should be able to go back to where she came from after that.

“Oh don’t get me wrong. I’m fine with having her in my house. She’s just so cute! Compared to the Mikuru in school, she’s so much cuter! Don’t you think so? She’s so cute that I want to hug her as I sleep ~nyoro.”

Don’t tell me Tsuruya-san already did that. Oh, how I admire her!

“That’s not all. Michiru’s so cute that you just want to bathe together with her. But whenever I say so, all she does is make a pained expression and say ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea…’ That just makes her even cuter than usual! Although you kinda sympathize with her afterwards. But I guess that’s nothing to worry about.”

10 Tsuruya-san lives in a big mansion, so big that it has to be divided into few different parts. There is the main house, omoya, and the guest house, koya. The original romaji were kept in order to maintain a more ‘Japanese’ feel to it.

Tsuruya-san then brought me to the koya[10]. Just like I expected, Asahina-san was inside. What I didn’t expect, though, was her wearing a woven kimono while kneeling down on the tatami mats.

“Kyon-kun…”

Upon seeing me, Asahina-san revealed a relieved expression. Now that’s a pretty cute expression too. As she got up and bowed towards me, I felt that there was nothing more beautiful than that scene in the entire world.

As I tried my best to wrench my eyes away from that sight and close the door behind me, I suddenly heard Tsuruya-san’s evil monomaniacal laughter ring out from behind. From her looks, I knew that she had lots of questions to ask me. So…

“Tsuruya-san, I’m sorry, but could you give the two of us a moment, please? A little while will do.”

“Hmm…?”

Tsuruya-san said as she peered over my shoulders at Asahina-san.

“The both of you? Alone? Together? In such a small space? Hohoho, I’m fine with that ~nyoro.”

Upon hearing Tsuruya-san’s words, Asahina-san’s face blushed bright red. Apparently this was the effect Tsuruya-san was waiting for, as she patted my shoulders and said,

“Well then, I guess I’ll go and change then. Fufufu, have fun chatting ~nyoro.”

And with that, Tsuruya-san strode elegantly towards the main house, leaving the both of us behind. After I had confirmed that she had indeed left, I plopped down on the floor, my body feeling as stiff as the very mats I was sitting on. Come on now, relax.

Now isn’t the time to think of that. For now, let’s just concentrate on what we came here for.

“These are the letters I mentioned earlier on the phone. I just received them this morning.”

I said as I took out the letters #3 and #4. I wouldn’t show her #6 for the time being, since I was the only recipient mentioned in the letter. I’m guessing that #6 is the last letter. There probably wouldn’t be any other letters in the future. Oh and as for #5, let’s just forget about that for the moment.

This is what #3 had to say:

11 Also known as Matthiola Incana, these plants may be white, yellow, red or purple.

“Two days later (Saturday), please head to the footbridge on ** street in ** district before dusk and face south. You should see some common stock[11] growing there. Please pick up the object beneath it and send it to the following address anonymously. Just so you know, that object is a mini transmitter.”

There was a separate paper attached, and on it was an address far away. There was also a drawing of what appeared to be the transmitter in question. By looking at the drawing alone, I wondered exactly what kind of transmitter this was. It didn’t look like something a normal human would draw.

Now for #4:

“Near the stream with the cherry blossom trees, you should recall a very familiar bench. Go there before 10:45 AM on Sunday. Bring along a small turtle with you. Before 10:50 AM, throw the aforementioned turtle into the lake. The turtle’s species doesn’t matter, but smaller ones are preferred.”

There was yet another paper attached with this letter too. This time, there was a picture of a cute little turtle blowing bubbles while waving towards me. On it were the words “Please take good care of me~”. The entire picture was done in a cartoonish style.

There was another thing #3 and #4 had in common: Both of them shared a same postscript. P/S: Remember to bring Asahina Michiru with you, and make sure it’s only the two of you. Finally, there was the line of orders only Asahina-san could understand.

Asahina-san studied both letters carefully. After finishing the second page of #4, she sighed.

“I don’t understand… Why turtles?”

What the heck was throwing a turtle into a stream in such cold weather supposed to mean? Whoever understood that must not be normal. The only thing that I knew was the bench, the one that Asahina-san had confessed to me about being a time traveler.

“But, we’ve got no choice…”

Asahina-san said as she studied the contents carefully again, before raising her head in determination.

“We don’t know what’s going on now, but there has to be a reason we’ve been asked to do this. If we don’t do it…”

For a moment, I detected a glimpse of sadness in Asahina-san’s eyes.

I could guess what came after “If we don’t do it…” That’s right, if we don’t do it, what purpose would sending Asahina-san back in time serve?

I wanted to hug Asahina-san tightly and tell her everything was all right, but in the end I didn’t do it. One of the reasons was due to my conscience. Another was due to Tsuruya-san’s needle-like stares suddenly popping out in my mind.

“Erm, you know, Asahina-san…” I mumbled, trying to drive away all evil intent from my mind.

“There’s another city-wide search this Saturday and Sunday right? If so, how am I supposed to follow these orders?”

Before dusk, huh. What a miserably fuzzy time. No one in the SOS Brigade was weird enough to mention such a time. How was I supposed to excuse myself?

“So should I find an excuse not to go?”

“No, Kyon-kun. You were present that day too.”

Asahina-san said as she folded away the very important letter.

“As usual, we were separated into two teams by drawing lots. I just remembered… Nagato-san, Suzumiya-san and I were paired together on Saturday morning and Kyon-kun with Koizumi-kun, while Suzumiya-san, Koizumi-kun and I were paired together during Saturday afternoon and Kyon-kun with Nagato-san…”

Asahina-san said as she nodded her head gently, as if confirming her memories.

“During Sunday morning, Suzumiya-san, Koizumi-san and I were once again paired up, while Kyon-kun was again paired with Nagato-san. Since we each went our separate ways before noon, there wouldn’t be a second draw… Eh?”

Asahina-san stopped abruptly through her speech, as if sharing the same thoughts as I did.

It was too perfect to be called a coincidence. What was the possibility of that happening anyway?

If what Asahina-san said was true, then I would be paired together with Nagato twice. Since we had five members, two of us were destined to be paired together in a two-people group. I needed to be paired in one of those two-people groups at least twice in three tries. I’m not going to start calculating the probability of that happening, but even so, I knew that it was pretty low.

Speaking of which, I was sure that Nagato knew a little about the situation. If it’s drawing lots, I’m sure it would be no big deal for Nagato. All I have to do is ask her while she places her order at the café.

“So, what should we do?”

Asahina-san said as she revealed a face that severely lacked confidence.

But if things don’t go according to what Asahina-san said, then I would be in a bigger mess than I was currently in now. Was it really okay to ask Nagato to help me? Or rather, was it really necessary? According to Asahina-san’s memories, a time traveler that came from one week into the future, I would be paired in a two-person group all three times. Would it be possible for things to turn up different than what she said? Or would everything happen naturally? Even if I just sat back and relaxed, would I still be paired together with Nagato in a two-person group? Or did that happen because I requested for it to happen?

Gah, what am I worrying about? Asahina-san probably had no way of knowing if my future self had requested help from Nagato before, so…

“We’ll go ask Nagato for help.” I said. “Even though it’s not fair asking for her assistance while concealing something behind our backs, we have no choice. The slightest mistake may result in large consequences, so it’s better to be on the safe side. I’m sure Nagato understands.”

“That’s what I had in mind too.”

Asahina-san said while agreeing readily.

“During the city-wide patrol, Kyon-kun, you had a weird expression on your face. I think I now know why. You must have been thinking about the drawing of the lots.”

What did “weird” refer to anyway? What expression should I wear then?

“Erm… You know… Weird as in… weird.”

Asahina-san's answer still left me in the dark, but I don't blame her. How are you going to describe "What type of weird" anyway?

"I'm sorry, I have no idea how to explain it to you…"

There's no need to apologize, Asahina-san. Besides, this is a pretty trivial matter.

"But… Oh wait, I just remembered something. During the Sunday search, while Suzumiya-san, Koizumi-kun and I were at the book store…"

Whatever Asahina-san had to say seemed pretty important, as she placed her fingers on her forehead, trying her best to recall the incident.

"Suzumiya-san received a prank call."

Who called her?

"Kyon-kun, you did."

I did? During desperate times like this, my future self still had the time to prank call Haruhi?

"Ah, Suzumiya-san said something like, 'That Kyon, calling me all of a sudden just to tell me a lame joke!' after she hung up at around 11 AM."

So I did another weird thing, eh. That is to say after I chucked a poor little turtle into the stream, I would prank call Haruhi and tell her some lousy joke.

"What did the joke sound like? Did Haruhi say anything?"

"She didn't say anything about it, but as we gathered for lunch, you apologized to her about it, Kyon-kun."

So I go from performing weird acts to betraying my own moral code, eh? Why in the world would I apologize to Haruhi?

"Kyon-kun, you said, 'I'm sorry for cracking such a lame joke.'"

This is getting even weirder. Bowing my head, apologizing so sincerely to Haruhi… What could possibly make that happen?

When I tried to press for further information, all Asahina-san did was shake her head. It appeared that Haruhi didn't continue pressing the matter anymore, as we then proceeded to chat about other events.

I give up. Knowing that I would commit such unthinkable acts in the future was bad enough, but not knowing why I had to do them was even worse. Can someone please piece together the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle and tell me what is going on?

"Now about that turtle…"

I said as I held letter #4.

"During a time like this, it's practically impossible to find a turtle crawling around on the road or something. How are we supposed to find one?"

I didn't have the heart to dig up a hibernating turtle from beneath the ground. I would probably have enough digging to do tomorrow. Or did it so happen that we stumbled upon a hibernating turtle instead of buried treasure?

"No. We didn't find anything that day, be it treasure or turtles."

So that is to say our merry treasure hunt tomorrow would turn out to be nothing more than a hike, eh.

"We have no other choice but to purchase one."

I suddenly recalled that there was a pet store in the local supermarket nearby. It was the same pet shop I would frequent to buy Shamisen's food. I remember seeing turtles that were meant to be used for experiments being sold in there before. Why not purchase one on my way home? But wait, there was no way I could bring a turtle together with me while the SOS Brigade gathers, could I? Oh well, guess that can't be helped. I'll just have to leave it in Asahina-san's care then.

Thinking of the many preparations I would have to do over this weekend, I suddenly felt as if my weekend had vanished into thin air.

After that, Asahina-san and I discussed where and when we should meet on Saturday and Sunday. After all of our basic preparations were complete, I slowly got up.

Asahina-san walked me to the door, which, upon opening, revealed a plain-clothed Tsuruya-san standing outside in the cold waiting for us.

"Ara, ara, that little moment sure was long! Let's not mince words, shall we? Spit it out, Kyon-kun, did you do anything in there?"

Tsuruya-san said as she laughed madly. She couldn't have peeped through the doors, could she? It's a good thing she didn't continue to press on any further. Hiding things from women is just not my specialty.

I pretended to smile as I quickly made my leave. Asahina-san's beet red face continued to remain in my mind, even after the Tsuruya Residence had long disappeared from my sight.

Chapter 4

The second morning, I was awakened by my little sister, who came to shut off my alarm.

“It’s noisy, isn’t it Shami?”

My sister seized a curled-up Shamisen, hugged him close, and then put that pile of fur on my nose, asking,

“It’s breakfast~~. Are you gonna eat~?”

This voice, which belongs to a tone-deaf person who constantly practices singing in order to get better at it, irritated my brain more than the alarm did.

“I’m eating.”

I brushed away the claws my sister was playing with and picked myself up. Then I lifted Shamisen from my sister’s wrist and shifted him down off my bed. Being the bothersome cat he is, he ‘hmphed’ and jumped right back onto my bed.

So then I changed, with my sister standing off to the side pinching Shamisen’s furry cheeks. He immediately resisted and started to scamper away with a ‘pata pata’, only to have two hands latch onto his tail. So he let out a complaining ‘gnnyaa!’ and promptly escaped by running out of my room, my sister in pursuit. Since they started this noise first thing in the morning, I was awake in no time at all.

As I walked out of my room and started to wash my face, I saw my sister crooning ‘Kitty scarf~’ while draping Shamisen on the back of her neck. Shamisen clung to my sister’s woolen sweater, trying to defy her as best he could. Accordingly, I decided to calmly ignore them.

I brushed my teeth while looking at my oh-so-lively face in the mirror and wondering what day today was, all the while aimlessly thinking about random stuff, like the cold wind outside. The freezing gales outside were sort of like omens. I guessed spring was almost here. If possible, I’d like to be a freshman for a while longer, in the year where nobody knows me yet — not if it involves repeating a year, though. Also, I hoped the weather won’t get colder. I don’t mind digging for treasure, or wandering around the city, but I did want it to become warmer. It’s February already. February.

But, if someone had told Haruhi about this activity any other month, we would have had to do it then. Good thing nobody told Haruhi about going diving for sunken treasure or something. Yes, keep it like this.

After eating breakfast, I realized that I would be climbing up that mountain again, so I put on my jacket, then I walked to the station. I didn’t ride my bike, since we’re going to the Tsuruya family’s mountain. It’s just a bus ride, and obviously meeting at the mountain itself would have

allowed us to get started earlier. This method of gathering one by one is obviously pointless, as proven by experience.

12 Kyon is refering to the Aesop fable where the Wind and the Sun decide who is stronger.

One side of my head was taking a bath in something that seemed like the North Wind in all its glory doing battle with the sun[12], so I hid my face in my scarf and walked forwards. I didn't walk especially fast, but this wasn't because I had lots of time until the deadline, but because even if I'm on time, I'm always the last one to arrive. It usually goes like that. The only time I've ever been the person waiting for the others was that one time.

So, when I finally got to the train station, it was already 5 before 9. The other SOS members had assembled already, and were all staring at me.

Haruhi's face looked like she was going to pass Divine Judgment on me.

"Why are you always late?! I had hoped that when I got here, everybody would be gathered and waiting for me. Don't you feel ashamed for making the Brigade leader wait?"

One person who understands my pain is obviously not you. You always say something about the other three people arriving before you, leaving me as the only one to arrive after. Some comment along the lines of me not having to pay for everyone's drinks is just because you said I didn't have to. So, then you'd say you wish I would reflect on this.

"What are you talking about? Is the late person not you?"

Haruhi happily looked at me.

"What is it, Kyon, it looks like something's troubling you. What's wrong?"

Nothing's wrong. It's just that this holiday finally came, but it's a freezing day, and I'm irritated because I have to spend this cold day digging up treasure that doesn't even exist.

"Look more alive. Did Shamisen get sick again?"

"No-pe."

I pulled back my neck and shook it.

"I'm just a little cold."

Heh-heh. The ardent Haruhi shook her hands, and said,

"At times like this, you have to adapt to the environment, both mind and body have to change. Yes, climbing a mountain in the middle of a cold winter is very much the thing to do! The reason we're doing this is simple, right?"

I'm not a plastic model, how the hell do I change that easily? I'm not somebody with an 'on-off' switch, something Haruhi with her 'one-season-all-year-ness' cannot understand.

While Haruhi and I had our normal morning banter, the other three people stood there like an audience.

Koizumi, Asahina-san and Nagato's appearances were casual, basic and natural, respectively. Nagato's natural outfit is the uniform and the short jacket. There's no need to ask her why she's wearing that for mountaineering. If I brought Nagato to Tsuruya-san's house and left her there, Tsuruya-san would happily give Nagato clothes Tsuruya-san wore a long time ago. I have to try that next time.

It felt like Koizumi's some model who walked out of a commercial. He's wearing a stylish winter outfit, standing there with a slight smile. He looks exactly like a mannequin in the window of a store in the mall if you ignore the two shovels that he should've left at a work site.

And Asahina-san had on a pair of unadorned pants and a commonplace jacket. Now that I think about it, in all this time, I've never seen Asahina-san in the same outfit twice.

"Lunch boxes, I prepared them."

Is it because you were looking forward to going, Asahina-san, with your 100% sincere smile and the two blue baskets you're carrying? Can I pretend I only came here today to eat that?

Also, this happy Asahina-san was commanded by me and kicked back in time, I still can't believe it. Is that Asahina-san telling the truth?

"Is something the matter?"

Asahina-san artlessly lifted her head.

"No, no," I calmly said. "I was just thinking that the lunch boxes were something to look forward to."

"Don't look forward to it that much. I don't know if I made them well or not……"

Asahina-san's face is just cute when she's blushing. The only person who can move my heart is her.

"The lunch boxes can't be bad."

Haruhi suddenly came into my field of vision.

"You, do you actually understand why you're here today? It's not to play, you know. Digging for treasure, digging for treasure! If you don't work hard, you don't get a lunch break!"

As she said this, Haruhi was the cold wind that fought against the sun, and won. I'll put away my 'child-that-came-out-to-play' smile, I'll use it later if I remember to, is what I wanted to say, but I chose not to.

Come to think of it, this is Haruhi's spirit-filled face. Entering the month of February, I had been lulled by her deceptive calm. I don't know why I feel like I was deceived.

On this unusual day, I didn't have to take everyone to a café. But it's not never again inviting them to a café, just not today. Next time we have a meeting, it doesn't matter what time I get there, I'll be paying for it all. As Haruhi said this, she walked towards the intersection in front of the bus stop. Maybe she was thinking, if she didn't get there fast enough, and spent too much time somewhere else, somebody would beat her to the treasure.

Anyways, she just wants to get to the mountain. I took the shovel she handed me, and we all got on the bus heading in the general direction of the mountain. I stood beside Koizumi, who had grabbed a hand-hold. Because we were both holding shovels, we stood out a lot, but whatever. It isn't too bad, the bus going towards the mountain didn't have too many passengers. That's the only thing I could rejoice about.

After being on the bus for about 30 minutes, at Haruhi's prompting we got off. The other station had been filled and congested; in contrast, this station is very natural and peaceful. It didn't seem like we were in the same city. Actually, because of school-planned events during my elementary and junior high years, I am very familiar with this region. If we walked north from here, this would become a real mountain hike. It's a good thing Tsuruya-san's mountain is lower than that one. I'm surprised that such a mountain is the private property of the Tsuruya family. I'd never climbed this one before, not even on school excursions.

"It'll be fun to climb up from here."

Haruhi studied the map and led the way. I don't actually know if this is called Mt. Tsuruya or not. Whatever, we looked up at the summit of Mt. Tsuruya while blowing white clouds out of our mouths.

This time the climb wasn't quite the same as two days ago when I went up this mountain together with Asahina-san. That time we came from the opposite side of the mountain from where we are now. If I were to say which side is shorter, I think the way Asahina-san and I went is actually more direct. Today, the path from the bottom of the hill, the place Haruhi chose, to the summit is winding back and forth. I see, so if we go this way, it should be easier to climb up. Yes……?

"Kyon! It's not a good time to be staring off into space, walk faster, faster!"

After hearing Haruhi's yell, my legs started walking forward. I'm getting the feeling like I'm being pushed into doing this. Therefore, I already don't want to do any work.

“I got it.”

I balanced the shovel on my shoulder and caught up to them on the path. Not only Haruhi, bouncing around like a wild rabbit, but Asahina-san also looks like an elementary student on a nature hike. Nagato’s still the same as usual, not much change there. And looking at Koizumi’s forced smile, I found myself wondering how many of us actually want to go treasure digging. I obviously have no wish to, since there is no reason I should work. Asahina-san (Michiru) has already put on my schedule that nothing will be found. The only person who wants to find treasure is Haruhi, anyway. To put it concisely, there might be a chance that we could find treasure, but Asahina-san wouldn’t, or couldn’t, lie. The hidden treasure which the Tsuruya family has passed on for generation after generation will never be found, this is the truth.

“What’s wrong?”

Koizumi walked beside me, a frank smile plastered across his face.

“Your expression makes it seem like you already know that what we’re doing is just a waste of energy.”

I didn’t say anything, since I have nothing to say to him.

Koizumi, aren’t you also showing a face that says that you already know what’s going to happen? Your face says that it doesn’t matter if we dig up something or not, and you’ve already made up your mind to treat this like a chore.

I think Asahina-san already knows there’s another her in this time. If she really does know, I should go talk to her about it. Did I come here just to have that chat with her? That would be convenient. I’ve already got Tsuruya-san to help me, I don’t need you to help with this anymore, Koizumi. So, I don’t think I’ll tell him anything. Being decisive is useless if you don’t get up and do it. The action is more important, and that leaves room for impulsive behavior too.

And about me not answering him, I wonder what Koizumi’s thinking. He lifted the shovel just a little bit, the front of the shovel pointing forwards. His smile showed he’s either taking treasure digging very lightly or he already knows what’s going on.

Meh, the Koizumi now is no different from the normal Koizumi. I honestly don’t know what I’m worrying about. Anyway, we came here today to climb the mountain.

Haruhi pushed aside the weeds and advanced upwards.

“First, we go to the top. If it were me burying treasure, I would put it in a place so it can be found easily. Tsuruya-san’s ancestors are also human beings, so they must’ve put it in the most obvious place as well.“

If the first thing that makes hidden treasure hidden treasure is the fact that it’s hidden in an easy to find place, you might as well not hide it at all. It doesn’t matter what’s logical, we just do what

Haruhi wants us to. Because she is the leader of the SOS Brigade. She even commands Aliens, Time Travelers and Espers. We have to listen to her, because she is our head.

I wanted to reach out and pat the heavily breathing, very tired Asahina-san's back, but because Haruhi had already pulled ahead, there was no chance for me to do so, and we kept climbing, just like this. After about thirty minutes, we reached the summit. Oddly, the mountain path seems like it was made so as not to tire the hikers. If we weren't walking on a slow, ambling path, we would've actually climbed a mountain.

Since walking up that path is only slightly more tiring than walking on flat ground, I didn't feel especially tired. Maybe because when I walk to school every day, I have to climb up and down that huge hill, and the strength of my legs naturally increased. The problem is, what we're going to do next will tire me out.

That would be the treasure digging part, and now it's up to Haruhi to choose a spot.

"Is it not in this area?"

In a nutshell, wherever Haruhi pointed, we would have to dig a hole. Wouldn't this be too easy a spot if you were going to bury money or treasure? Even though I can't say that I actually know where it is, but even after digging two meters, all the shovels manage to dig up is hard soil and small rocks. The digging must be done by the males, and because of that, the only people digging are Koizumi and me. The three girls seem like they've come for a picnic, only the cheers of Asahina-san lend me a little comfort.

Haruhi just casually pointed again, "This time, here." Nagato's just like a stone Buddha, the kind that would tell me exactly where the treasure was if I prayed to it a bit. But assuming she really could do that, it would be very peculiar to manage to dig up buried treasure on the first try. So I, with my little bit of self-respect, managed to refrain from worshipping Nagato.

Trying to find anything is troublesome from the beginning. Also, the reality-ignoring Haruhi, who is just relying on her decision making skills and working oh-so-hard, doesn't she hold any suspicion that the treasure won't be found? The only people who have a problem with this thing would be me and Koizumi, and since Koizumi's happy face looks like it's carved of wood, so in the end, the only one feeling like a laborer is me.

I wanted to get Taniguchi and Kunikida to come and help me, but Haruhi said no.

"Ii? What we're going to look for is treasure, treasure! The people who dig it up all have to get a share. Because I'm a fair Brigade leader, I will split it evenly among the people who helped. If they come, I'll have to divide it into seven portions, I don't want to do that for a totally stupid reason!"

13 Genroku (Japanese: 元禄) was a Japanese era that spanned the period from 30 September 1688 to 13 March 1704. The reigning emperor was Higashiyama, the reigning Shogun was Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, nicknamed the "dog shogun". The period followed the Jōkyō era and was followed by the Hōei era.
The era is generally considered to be the golden era of the Edo period. The previous hundred years of peace and seclusion in Japan led to economic stability, and arts and architecture flourished. To finance the splendour of the Genroku era, the Shogunate reduced the quality of coins. This caused an inflation. To solve the crisis, the Kyoho Reforms were carried out a few years after the era.

If what we dug up was gold coins from the Genroku era[13] then I would agree. But, this treasure map came from Tsuruya-san's house. Even if you say that Tsuruya-san's family was here back in ancient peaceful times and has continued on to now, if we look at the changes in time, there must've been some difficult times. The treasure the ancestors left, wouldn't it be a good time to use it then? This treasure map must've been followed by some Tsuruya leader way back when, or maybe they just wanted to pull a prank on their descendants. Like spending lots of energy digging up this treasure, only to find a slip of paper with 'Try again.' on it. I think the chance of this happening is quite big, this seems like just the type of thing that Tsuruya-san's ancestors would do. Tsuruya-san herself said that. So that's why she gave the map so casually to Haruhi. Tsuruya-san must've known that the leader of the Tsuruya house would do something of the sort. Also, using her imagination, she can see that they would laugh until their stomachs hurt if someone in the future actually tried to dig it up. This map is something that gets people excited at first, and in the end it's just a joke that everyone can laugh at. What a-.

…Is what I wanted to tell everybody, but I had to keep it to myself and silently dig up dirt using the shovel.

Because it's only a small hill, the area at the top of the hill naturally isn't very big. Digging here and there up on the summit is just making burrows, basically. According to Haruhi, the only people supposed to be physically doing anything are me and Koizumi. Unlike the pretending-to-be-a-mole-while-smiling Koizumi, I keep feeling more and more mistreated. The holes we dig can be very dangerous if we don't take care where we're digging. So after digging it up, we have to put all the dirt back. Because of this pointless gesture, we have lots more work to do. I'm getting this feeling of being put into a work camp.

"Quit talking and dig faster."

Haruhi sits at the side with her legs crossed, looking like the head commander of a great battle with her invincible smile as she directed us. The slight figure sitting beside Haruhi is Nagato; she's currently sitting there reading a book. Asahina-san, sitting on the left, huddles close to Haruhi to keep warm.

“Kyon, isn’t it good that you get to do that? Since you’re sweating, you’ll feel warm. Look, the place where I’m sitting is very cold, and if you don’t dig up that treasure soon, I’ll be frozen solid. Is the way you’re digging wrong or something?”

I’m digging exactly where you tell me to dig. If you want to get some exercise, just choose another random spot and start digging yourself.

For some reason, Asahina-san, clinging to Haruhi’s arm, looks a little anxious.

“Umm… should I come and help?”

“No need,”

Haruhi replied very casually.

“This is good for Kyon. It’s his training for future careers in carpentry and other work. If he has no experience, it will be very tiring later on.”

I don’t want to hear any life lessons from someone my own age.

“Sometime later, you’ll reflect and will think about how great this experience was. That’s the way it is. People should do a bit of everything while they can.”

Then you come do it.

“Oy, Haruhi,”

I stopped digging and mopped my brow.

“Even if the way I dig is correct, we won’t find anything anyways. You can’t be planning to level this mountain, and we’re still not sure if the treasure exists.”

“What, after all this and you still don’t get it. We haven’t found out if it’s here yet.”

“We haven’t found it, therefore, we don’t know if it’s here or not. We should find out if that treasure exists first, then dig if it does.”

Haruhi’s jaw dropped in shock, but her eyes were bright and laughing.

“Isn’t this evidence?”

In her hand was the Tsuruya family’s handed down map.

“It says something’s buried up here, so something must be here. I trust Tsuruya-san’s ancestors. So there’s treasure here, there’s got to be!”

Even though she just made up a random, reasonless excuse, Haruhi still hadn't changed her confident expression.

"But, I kind of agree."

As if she were thinking of something, Haruhi tapped her forehead.

"Since they thought burying it on the top was too reckless, and climbing up is too troublesome, it's probably a little bit lower than here. Un, I also wanted it to be in a more exciting place."

Haruhi let go of Asahina-san's hand and fixed up her shoes.

"I'll start looking for other places something could be buried. Oh, and Kyon, go dig there for a sec."

After telling me the newest location of digging, Haruhi walked towards the huge forest. She walked forwards where there was no path, exactly opposite from the way we came up, her shoes making a sound.

I silently gazed after the departing Haruhi. If my sense of direction isn't wrong, if you go down that way, a flat kind of area will appear about mid-mountain. Then, push over that gourd-shaped rock. It will seem to be telling us to dig there, sort of like a giant marker.

Even though I could've done as Haruhi asked and dug a hole, I chose to throw down the shovel and let Koizumi have the job of filling in the hole, opting to sit on the mat.

"Here…"

Asahina-san poured the hot tea into a paper cup and gave it to me. This is a better source of nutrition than anything else anyone can give me. It's very sweet; this sweetness is just like Asahina-san herself.

The mannered Asahina-san held onto the thermos, and she watched me finish the brown liquid with a smile on her face.

"Fufu, it's a good day today. The scenery's so beautiful……"

We looked into the distance as though nothing is happening around us. Facing south, we looked from the top of the mountain down. In the distance, I could just barely see the street by the hill where I lived, and beyond that, the sea.

Hyuu~, the wind started to blow. Asahina-san's body started to tremble.

"The faster spring comes, the better. February's so cold."

I sense a kind of loneliness from Asahina-san, even though she smiled and looked around at the lovely scenery on the top of the hill.

“If the flowers bloom, this will be a calming, comfortable place.”

Then, let’s come again some other time. Next time to view the flowers. After about two months, the cold air will disappear, when the warm air comes in, then we come.

“Ah, that, that’s good. Flower viewing. I’ve always wanted to.”

Asahina-san hugged her knees and changed the way she was sitting.

“April, I guess. I’ll already be a third-year when that time comes.”

Probably. I’ll hopefully be a second year too. If Asahina-san passed, she would be a third-year student. Unless she fails.

“Eh, no problem.”

Even though she said this, it seemed like she was saying it while sighing.

“But, it would be good if I could be a second-year again. I slightly think that. I want to be classmates with Kyon and everybody. As of now, there’s only me who’s a year higher than everyone, but I don’t feel like an upperclassman at all…”

Asahina-san caring about something like this is very normal. A childish face, not very tall, yet beautiful, blossoming, charming young girls will idolize her. The one that got her to join on the basis of this unreasonable thing was Haruhi, one you cannot argue with and win. If she ever thought about wanting Asahina-san to be in the same grade as us, she herself couldn’t care less if it took failing a grade or going back a grade. She’d say something like, it’s okay, you just need to be the SOS Brigade’s amazing maid.

“Ufu. Thanks.”

Maybe because she’s worrying since Nagato is sitting near her, Asahina-san softly said,

“It’d be good if we can also do stuff next year……”

Just as I was about to tell her about the other Asahina-san, Haruhi returned, breaking through branches and undergrowth recklessly.

“What, you’re resting already?”

I haven’t for about two hours, I think.

“Fufun, whatever. I’m starting to get hungry too.”

Haruhi looked very happy as she bounced back.

“Mikuru-chan, let’s eat.”

“Ah, yes, yes.”

The form of Asahina-san opening the basket looks very godly. She took out, one by one, handmade sandwiches, triangular onigiri, and several other simple dishes. To me, this is the real treasure, saying I came here today just to eat this isn’t really lying.

“……”

Nagato silently closed her book, and stared at Asahina-san’s hand. Koizumi, since he had finished filling in the hole, walked over after sticking the shovel in the soft dirt.

“It looks really good.”

I gently said what I thought before I started.

“Of course it’ll be good. Because you’re eating it after exercise.”

Haruhi randomly decided another thing for me. She then poured hot tea into her cup. When she was done, she lifted the thermos into the air.

“Well, I hope we can find some treasure, everyone can have a bit.”

Looking at this scene here, it seems like we’re on a picnic. If you ignore the dirt on me and Koizumi, that is.

Even Haruhi, putting Nori in her mouth while looking sideways, has forgotten that we came here today to look for treasure, as she eats the lunch Asahina-san made. Although Koizumi and I haven’t dug anything up yet, even if we use the shovels and randomly dig, it wouldn’t be considered weird. Today, Haruhi seems almost too happy. It seems as though the whole purpose of coming here today was to eat lunch with everybody.

Like Asahina-san’s (Big) notes from the future, Haruhi’s actions lately have been confusing me quite a bit. Suddenly going into a melancholic stage, and then suddenly wanting to scatter those beans, making me think she was a bit more mature now, at least. But then she used that treasure map to cause this……

Well, is it bad if it keeps going like this? If we compare this with the time I got put into the Avatars’ closed space, or when it was clearly Autumn but the cherry blossoms had appeared and were filling in the classroom, this place is only as difficult as having to choose to return home by either the light of the moon or the Andromeda galaxy. It’s different, more like getting every constellation known to man or riding on the galaxy railroad to places no one has ever gone before. It’s different. Though I have already experienced the autumn anomaly of Closed Space.

Five people eating a picnic together is actually quite fun. The unstopping, continuously eating Nagato made me feel right at home. She's still the same as when I first met her. And with this, Haruhi's energy is more than enough and Koizumi's the same as he always is. If I say Asahina-san's the same as usual, it's not wrong, but there's another little Asahina-san living at Tsuruya-san's house right now, just like a little lost cat. As soon as I think of this, I lose my easiness.

"Hey, Kyon. If we find any treasure, what do you plan on doing with it?"

Asked Haruhi after she took a bite out of a pork sandwich. This is the type of thing I frequently daydream about, so I already have an answer.

"I would change it immediately to cash and go buy a new game system. And with the leftover money, I would buy new video games. Then, if I still had some, I would go to the bookstore my mother took me to a couple of years ago, and buy every manga I couldn't afford before. I would then proceed to save the rest."

"That's -. How is that any different from how you use your allowance? You should have bigger and grander dreams."

Having finished that pork sandwich in the blink of an eye, Haruhi looked at me as though pitying me. She smiled sympathetically. Then you decide what to do with your share, let's hear it.

"About gold and money, I don't actually want it a lot. Treasure that can be exchanged for money, likewise. Since it's something we worked hard to get, we must take extremely good care of it. This is because we are going to bury it somewhere ourselves. Then we'll give our descendants a treasure map, don't you feel this is something money can't buy?"

If it's children, I guess they would love this kind of treasure hunting game. I shouldn't only think of using the treasure like my allowance. If it's something useful, I will keep it happily. If it's something useless, we might as well bury it or throw it out.

"That's boring."

Just like a jester, Haruhi's lip curled and she started to laugh.

"Maybe. If it's going to be like Kyon's foolish idea, I think it would be better if the treasure wasn't one you could exchange for money. Mikuru-chan agrees too, right?"

"Eh-?"

Asahina-san suddenly got asked a random question. Her half-finished onigiri dropped down, and her graceful hand covered her now-chewing mouth. Her eyes whipped over.

"Ye… Yeah, I agree. Wait, no… Um, that kind of thinking seems to be more joyful…"

I wonder why Asahina-san didn't finish her sentence, and, after seeing both Haruhi and I staring at her with inquisitive eyes, nervously waved her hands around.

"De, I just hope we can find the treasure."

"Don't worry, treasure will be dug up. I know it."

Haruhi always says these baseless things, and now she has shoved a whole salad sandwich into her mouth, both her cheeks were very full.

Nagato, sitting on the corner, also displayed a Haruhi-like appetite, and steadily ate. Koizumi, at the side, seemed to be pretending to be a young idol, as he knelt on one knee there. As my line of sight moved over, Koizumi just quietly slanted his paper cup and looked at me with a slight smile. As Asahina-san cleaned up the bentos, Haruhi and Nagato just sat there staring off into space.

For this short time, the messages from the future, the other Asahina-san in Tsuruya-san's house, it all disappeared from my mind. Maybe it's because our whole group is together and happily eating a picnic lunch that I feel so joyful. An out-of-season mountain hike, a pointless treasure hunt, a content Haruhi, an unchanged Nagato and the same-as-usual Koizumi and Asahina-san, when I see them like this, for the moment I feel that nothing will go wrong.

No… I might as well assume that nothing will go wrong.

That's what I should think. So, I should just do what I need to tomorrow and the day after that, in my future.

So, just like that, the vivacious lunch ended. My stomach is very full, and since we have nothing else to discuss, Haruhi and I drank tea while talking about trivial matters. Then Haruhi clapped her hands together and stood up. Things that must happen must happen sometime, said the other side of my heart.

"Okay, the treasure hunt in the afternoon is going to start."

Haruhi squinted at Asahina-san, who was currently cleaning up the lunch boxes and thermos.

"I just walked down the mountain from there. This mountain is covered in trees, there's not a good place at all for digging. From this, I came to the conclusion that it must be buried somewhere without trees. If there are trees growing on top, we can't dig holes there."

Haruhi made me pick up the shovel.

“But, there’s progress, I found a very suitable place to dig at. Let’s go together. It’s straight down this way. It’s also faster to get home, so we shouldn’t have taken that bus, this is the shorter path.”

I noticed Koizumi had already put the shovel onto his back and was prepared to descend down. Nagato folded the mat and held it, Asahina-san held both the baskets, and I got ready very quickly too.

Haruhi was just like a Kamoshika, and she quickly jumped through the rocks and branches. And even on this steep path, Nagato’s still walking with ease.

“Ah, that was close.”

Nagato pulled on Asahina-san, who almost fell several hundred times. Koizumi and I both have heavy shovels in our hands, we couldn’t help her at all. I really want to throw away this shovel and help Asahina-san, but I guess I can just leave her to Nagato. Asahina-san, who always says thank you after being helped, is extremely polite.

It’s a good thing our path is pretty much just going in a straight line down the mountain. Compared to our climbing time, it’s almost faster than I can imagine, and we got to the site faster than I expected.

“Here. Look, don’t you think this is an unnatural plateau?”

We stopped and looked like she told us to. No doubt about it, this is the place Asahina-san (Michiru) and I came to two days ago. It’s shaded by tall trees and the sunlight is dull and dim. The ground is littered with leaves that form an odd crescent shape. I strongly feel that I’ve seen this somewhere before.

The stone gourd is still in the position where we left it. This is the rock I moved three meters west, and just like that other day, I have another situation to go through. At least the rock isn’t as white as it was two days ago. Ah, I see, it’s because it rained. Because the whole stone got extremely wet, the color turned darker, but it also got rid of the excess dirt. If you don’t look closely, the colors of the previously exposed and buried parts are not that differentiable.

Ah, Haruhi. As she walks in a circle around the rock, I’m already becoming slightly nervous. I hope her extremely sharp sixth sense doesn’t sense anything weird. Haruhi suddenly put one foot on the rock, and expressionlessly pushed it to the side. After that, she didn’t care about the rock and just sat on it.

“Kyon, Koizumi-kun. The second phase starts now. We can’t just randomly dig, now can we?”

The smile she showed was just like a small girl playing a prank. Koizumi immediately said, “I understand,” and followed Haruhi’s instructions. I, however, have a better spot to dig.

Asahina-san (Michiru)and I had attempted to camouflage the original spot of the gourd-shaped rock, but if someone took the time to inspect it, they will find a lot of unnatural things there.

"…"

For some reason, Nagato has already set up the mat exactly at that spot. She looked past the hair at the side of her face at me. Nagato didn't do any code-like movements, just sat on the mat, silently reading. The corner-liking alien left a large space on the mat, so Asahina-san politely sat down. This type of scene is like a goddess, rare. The person sitting between them looks especially important.

"Kora-! Kyon, this isn't the time to be spacing out, go and help Koizumi-kun dig."

This SOS Brigade leader is yelling just like someone on a construction site making sure her subordinates aren't slacking off. She really is a person who likes bossing others around. Haruhi already has minions and the forcefulness required to be a boss, even though she hasn't even graduated yet. Just something I noticed. And as I thought that, I realized I didn't have to think of this that way. I picked up the shovel and began to dig into the wet ground faster than Koizumi was.

I guess I'll tell you all what happened.

It was pretty much what I expected it to be. No matter how we dig, even if we got a digging machine, we will never dig anything up. It was exactly as Asahina-san (Michiru) said, so I wasn't surprised at all. I, who was afraid of making a mistake and digging up something weird, could finally relax, yet I got a complex feeling of disappointment. Was this actually good? Did I think too optimistically?

"U-n. We didn't find anything, any buried treasure that is," said Haruhi, looking perplexed. She held a chocolate bar and munched on it while looking at me. Haruhi was still sitting on top of that gourd-shaped rock.

I stopped filling in the hole and surveyed the clearing. The ground has been dug everywhere, there's a whole bunch of holes and holes that were filled up, just like a bird dug it. It's better if natural things are left undisturbed.

"I guess that's it."

Haruhi is never like this. She hunched her shoulders together,

"It doesn't look like there's any more places to dig, let's just end it like this."

After using her finger to point and instruct us, Haruhi walked back to the gourd-shaped rock and sat right in the middle.

Koizumi and I have been listening to Haruhi and digging all this time. No matter where we dug, all we found were empty holes. Koizumi and I once again returned the dirt to its original position.

So all we did was turn the hard dirt into soft soil suitable for earthworms to live in.

Nothing was found, and it ended just like that. I don't know how Haruhi will choose to vent her anger this time.

"Go home, I guess. The sun's already setting, if we stay on the mountain any longer, we'll freeze. If we go down from this side, it's quicker. It's not that far from the road up to North High."

Koizumi and I cleaned up the baggage without haste after resting a bit and drinking tea Asahina-san had steeped. When we were rested, we all went down together. I really couldn't see any regrets about leaving the mountain and the treasure in Haruhi, who was descending the mountain in high spirits. What the hell happened? The picnic in cold weather and the digging?

Koizumi put his hand on a disappointed me's shoulder.

"Isn't this quite good?"

You don't need to talk to me in a teaching tone. As I got angry, I suddenly remembered my mother's words.

"Sorry. But I am also really tired. Before Suzumiya-san finds a place that looks like it was dug on before, we should leave as soon as possible."

This I also agree with. Nagato, who only brought a mat today, was already leaving with Asahina-san. I was just wondering if what I did had a point to it.

"A point?"

"Suzumiya-san never has patience or perseverance, and is always changing. Isn't it like that every time?"

Haruhi, who didn't want to look for treasure anymore, was walking very fast, leading us. Asahina-san and Nagato both followed behind. A little further back was me and Koizumi.

Sometime later, about halfway home, Koizumi quietly said,

"But, if there wasn't any treasure at all, that's really weird."

This phrase of yours, why do I feel like agreeing?

“Really? If Suzumiya-san really felt something was there, it doesn’t matter if Tsuruya-san’s ancestors buried anything at all, there would be something there. If it’s Suzumiya-san, she still has this kind of power.”

Yes. According to what you said before.

“But, for some reason, we didn’t actually FIND anything. Why do you think that is?”

To tell you the truth, I think it’s because Haruhi doesn’t think it exists. It’s not possible to have such a clear map, so it must be some old grandpa’s practical joke.

Koizumi nodded mystically.

“You’re good, Kyon, you already know what I mean. Right, Suzumiya-san doesn’t actually want treasure or anything passed down from a long-ago dynasty. I think there’s only one explanation for this. I think she just wanted to come out and picnic with everyone.”

Well, just say so then, don’t just say that you want to dig up some treasure. I wouldn’t be against us all going out together on a picnic.

“This is something that goes on inside a girl’s mind. From winter vacation all the way up to now, her spirit has been very stable. Maybe I should say she might be bored with this kind of stabilized life.”

Your work is very easy, right? Regardless of whether those blue giants appear or not, Koizumi’s wage will not be changing anytime soon……

“No, wait.”

I clutched my fist and asked,

“Haruhi’s stable right now? Since February began?”

“Yeah. There are slight fluctuations, but there’s no change that’s negative. How should I say this… In fact, she’s been even more stable than before.”

Then, what was that temporary melancholic period? Was my intuition wrong?

“What did you feel?”

Koizumi showed a slightly surprised look.

“What I see is just the normal Suzumiya-san.”

Aren’t you the expert on Haruhi’s mental state? Something even I could see you didn’t even notice. Are you planning not to do this analyzing thing anymore?

“That wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

The easily smiling Koizumi looked at me with a light gaze.

“If we compare ourselves, you can actually understand Suzumiya-san’s feelings better than I do. I will have to give this job to you. That includes the Avatars in Closed Space. You haven’t been to one in a while, that world has –”

That can’t be helped, since I don’t want to go on any grand vacations. Taking many things into account, I actually prefer to stay here.

“That’s a pity. To tell you the truth, it’s been quite a while since I’ve been there too.”

It must feel bad to have so little opportunity to use your long-awaited powers. Maybe you should go to your boss and ask for a little bonus; go on vacation or something.

“Let’s think about this together. The person who has to tell the boss about this proposal must be extremely brave.”

Like throwing a baseball around, Koizumi and I tossed words at each other. We were already at the same farm path as the one I saw two days ago. Haruhi, Nagato and Asahina-san, who went down ahead, stood in a line waiting for us. The three of them, standing shoulder to shoulder, were colored gold by the setting sun. If an impressionist artist saw them like that, he would probably start drawing. After gazing at the three of them for not quite long enough,

“We don’t need to go back to the station. Everybody’s dismissed now.”

Haruhi took the shovel from me, and a contented smile floated onto her face.

“That was fun. It’s actually quite good to occasionally come out into the outdoors. Even though there wasn’t any treasure, there’s no need to be depressed. We already found some, since someday in the future, we will look back and love this day. And we have to tell Tsuruya-san. Maybe next time we’ll find a dynasty map.”

I’d go for treasure any time, but please, no more maps. I’m also going to tell Tsuruya-san that if she ever finds such a thing, don’t give it to Haruhi.

I gazed at Haruhi’s back as she bounced down the street with the two shovels in her hands. I really couldn’t say anything that expressed anger. Her melancholic stage in the classroom, I still don’t know if that was just my misunderstanding. Anyway, it’s good that she’s back to her normal self. The strange peacefulness was just leading up to her explosion. During that time, she was storing up all her energy inside and, therefore, can never settle her mind. Eh? Why does it seem like I’m talking to myself?

As we walked down the road that led to North High, we were all still together. Then, just as we got to the place where we usually split up, Haruhi, like she just remembered something, waved towards me.

“Ah, right. Meet at the station tomorrow too. Same time as today, no problem?”

Well, it’s not too good, but couldn’t you have said something before?

Haruhi looked at me and coldly smiled. What, what’s with that smile?

“We’re going to search the city. You can’t even come for a little while?”

Even though we obviously can’t reject it, Haruhi pretended to be confirming everyone’s reply and walked around us in a circle.

“Understood. Don’t be late, everyone. The last person,”

After she took a deep, cold breath, Haruhi said something she says every time.

“Will be fined!”

I returned to my room. First I turned the heating on, then I took out my cell phone.

Like we had a scheduled meeting, the place I phoned was Tsuruya-san’s house. The maid who answered the phone was very polite. I’ve already gotten used to this switching around. The number of times I’ve called her has already surpassed the number of times I’ve called Koizumi.

“It’s me.”

“Ah, yes. It’s me. Michiru……Erm, Mikuru.”

“Tsuruya-san’s not home right now?”

“No… She went out today. Said her family had something to take care of.”

I think it’s probably better not to ask too much about where Tsuruya-san is, or what she’s doing.

“Asahina-san, it happened today.”

“Treasure hunt…?”

“Even though we didn’t find anything.”

I heard Asahina-san breath a sigh of relief.

“That’s good. It followed exactly what I remember… I was just worrying that if something different happened, what I was going to do.”

I put the phone close to my ear and wrinkled my brow like I was thinking about something.

“What do you mean, something different? If it’s the past, shouldn’t it be the same no matter where you go?”

“Ah… yeah. That, that, that is true, but……”

It seemed as though I could see the helpless Asahina-san holding the phone.

“It’s a very strange thing. Um, I don’t fully understand it, but…”

As I listened to Asahina-san’s quiet voice, I remembered something. I remembered that I’ve already been to December the eighteenth several times. I remembered the twin circles on the white board. If I think about it, is where something starts and ends always the same? What she doesn’t know is what I don’t know. Nagato changing the world, what really happened there? According to Koizumi, there were two December the eighteenths. If there are two of one time, that’s very troublesome, so then we fixed it back to the way it was before, so this time is the correct one, er, it should be…

What actually ha-. Last month, I saved an elementary student from getting into a car accident. That event with the glasses wearing elementary student must’ve been fate. But what about the vehicle? They did it to mess up the order of time. Who is it that wanted to kill the kid?

Who is it that wants to destroy the fabric of time, and pit themselves against the protectors, the time travelers, represented by Asahina-san? Whatever shall I do if that person is a time traveler as well? The only people who will be able to resist him will be time travelers.

I understand what you’re saying, Asahina-san (Big). Is there anything you wish for me to do?

“Sorry, Kyon-kun.”

Asahina-san said listlessly.

“Because this is Classified Information, there’s lots of things I want to tell you, but can’t. And I don’t know any important details… Kyon-kun, I…”

As I felt Asahina-san start to cry, I hurriedly said,

“So, about tomorrow.”

As Asahina-san said before, Haruhi wants to go on a city search again tomorrow. Tomorrow, Saturday, I must follow exactly what it says in letter #3. I need to find a place where we can meet and Asahina-san (Mikuru) won’t see us.

“Asahina-san, if it’s possible, can you change your look a little bit?”

“My look?”

From hearing her sniffing, I could imagine her crying body.

“Sunglasses… would be a bit unnatural for this season. You shouldn’t stand out too much if you wear a mask. Can you manage this kind of change?”

“Ah, yes. I’ll get Tsuruya-san to help me.”

“Then the time. When do we disperse tomorrow?”

“Er-m.”

Asahina-san can remember the time.

“Exactly five o’clock. We met at around three. Then everyone went to a coffee shop…”

I took out letter #3 from my desk, and opened it. The place it instructed me to go to was only about ten minutes from the station. Even if I take fifteen minutes, that’s still only half an hour.

I’ll stay at Tsuruya-san’s in the morning, go searching in the afternoon and then go to the appointed spot to meet Asahina-san. I guess that works.

After making this extensive schedule for me and Asahina-san, I told her about the place and time she and I would meet.

“Then, see you tomorrow, look after yourself. Please try not to wear anything too conspicuous. Ah, and,”

There were dark clouds in my heart as I said this.

“Also, if it’s possible, can you get Tsuruya-san to come with you? Just tell her I asked for a favor. Um, ah, no, it’s not to get her involved in this. Don’t worry. Just, I want her to escort you there…”

From Tsuruya-san’s house to the rendezvous point, Asahina-san has to go back and forth all by herself. That will be hard on her. I don’t know why, but I always think there’s danger. It’s best not to let her walk by herself.

“Yes. I’ll ask her.”

Since it’s Tsuruya-san, she’ll see through me in an instant. I’m looking forward to her reply.

I hung up the phone and immediately called Nagato, since there are a couple more things to ask her to do.

But.

“Huh?”

Surprisingly, the line was busy.

Who is Nagato talking to? Apart from a salesman, I don’t think anyone would phone her. I guess I’ll phone her later. As I felt sorry for myself, who had to phone everyone, I put the cell phone off to the side and changed. I put the pants that were covered in dirt into the washing machine, started it, and then phoned.

This time someone picked up.

“It’s me.”

“…”

As usual, Nagato’s silence greeted me.

“About tomorrow, I want to ask for a favor. Tomorrow’s search teams will be chosen by straws, right? Tomorrow and the day after that, I want you to help me do something.”

“Is that so.”

Nagato said in a cool, clear voice.

“It is. Tomorrow afternoon and the day after that’s first pick, can I be in your group?”

“……”

A long silence.

“Okay.”

I’m not sure if she’s agreeing with me, so I tried to confirm it.

“Can you do it?”

“I understand.”

“Thank you, Nagato.”

“No need.”

“If I may ask, when I called you a little while ago, the line was busy. Who was the other person?”

Another of Nagato’s long silences. I am now worried that something is going on with her and someone I know.

“Suzumiya Haruhi.”

Maybe it’d be better if I didn’t know the person.

“You two talked on the phone?”

“Yes.”

“Why did she phone you, did she have something to talk to you about?”

“……”

A third silence. My sense of hearing became keen, even the hand holding the phone sensed it. Nagato only said one line in reply.

“Not telling.”

What day is today, Nagato shocked me. I never thought Nagato would ever say that. Like I was blocked, I suddenly became silent.

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

Don’t say that kind of scary phrase. That’s the most unnerving phrase in the world.

“…Don’t worry.”

I can feel the hesitation behind her words. Like she’s contemplating whether or not she should tell me. It’s really worrying me.

“Did Haruhi tell you not to tell?”

“Yes.”

That means Haruhi is planning something, and then forced Nagato to follow along, so they can’t tell me. Even though I don’t know what’s really going on, but if it’s something that requires Nagato to keep a secret, it must be something big. I guess that’s why we’re going on this search.

I confirmed tomorrow’s actions with Nagato, who wasn’t really listening, and hung up the phone.

Give me a break. This is a busy week. Even the days before a math, physics or history exam can't compare to the business of this week.

"That Haruhi, what's she up to this time…?"

If I think of it this way, my only partner left is Koizumi. Haruhi, Nagato and even Asahina-san are doing things I didn't expect of them. Ah, Tsuruya-san is too. No matter what happens, to all intents and purposes, males cannot win against females. Maybe it's because of the extra X chromosome. Who taught me this lesson of life?

I lay on the bed, stretched out my arms and legs, and prayed that the next week would pass calmly.

Chapter 5

On the morning of the next day (Saturday)-

Because I was never really good at manual labor, I found my body aching all over, no thanks to Haruhi. Fortunately, I didn't dream of anything weird last night, and due to that I had a nice, deep sleep.

I placed letter #3 into the pocket of my outer coat and proceeded to fetch my bicycle. Cold winds blew through the streets, and it appeared that today would be a cold day too.

Due to the rising incidents of illegal parking, the authorities had decided to build a whole new parking lot in front of the train station. Anyone could park their bicycles inside if they purchased a ticket. After parking my bicycle, I proceeded towards the station, and found out that, unsurprisingly, I was again the last one to arrive. Asahina-san looked like a new kind of adorable pet, wearing a warm, cozy outfit while waiting for my arrival. Koizumi wore one of those elegant smiles that was bound to get at least one out of five high school girls' heads turning, and Nagato wore her sailor suit as usual, coupled with her cardigan and a hat, standing there quietly without uttering a word.

With a scarf wrapped around her neck, Haruhi pointed her finger towards me and said, "We've been waiting for a long time, Kyon. Thirty seconds, to be exact."

Oh that's too bad. If only I had parked my bicycle somewhere else instead of in the new parking lot, it would be the first city-wide search where I wasn't the last one to arrive. Or maybe I just wanted Haruhi to treat us.

"If that were the case, I would definitely treat all of you. But before that, let me make this clear: I do not like winding up last for anything, be it mock examinations, a race, or a meeting like this! I would rather sleep here overnight than be late."

14 The tachi is a Japanese long sword which is slightly longer than a katana. It was used primarily on horseback, where it was able to be drawn efficiently for cutting down enemy footsoldiers. However, on the ground, while it was still an effective weapon, it was nevertheless awkward to use. This is why its companion, the uchigatana (the predecessor of the katana) was developed.

Haruhi announced this with a big, energetic smile, like a knight eagerly awaiting a challenge. Indeed, the Haruhi before me looked as if she could knock down any foe before her while swinging a tachi[14]. She should really learn to concentrate that overwhelming enthusiasm of hers into more useful endeavors. As I was thinking about what she could have done with her enthusiasm, Haruhi had already forcefully pulled me and the other brigade members to the coffee house.

"Even though we didn't find anything yesterday," Haruhi said while chugging down her hot drink, "We should think about it for a moment. The SOS Brigade's goal is not to find some

ancient relic, but rather extraordinary events, like for instance some mysterious object left behind by a time traveler from the future. This town just reeks of time travelers! I'm sure we'll be able to find something today!"

Isn't the town a little bit too big a scope?

"It's not a matter of how big the town is, but rather how advanced, how populated it is that time travelers will mostly take into consideration."

"…Just forget it."

I give up. What's this have to do with how advanced a town is, or how heavily populated it is? Haruhi's "extraordinary events" were those that didn't appear on a schedule, and nobody knew when they would happen, or what they would be for that matter. Under these circumstances, all we could do was wait for the predetermined events to happen.

From my point of view, I didn't "discover" these extraordinary events, but was rather "forced to discover" these events instead. All I could do was do what I was told, and that's all because… I mean, thanks, to you.

As I was busy thinking back on what had happened during my past experiences, Haruhi had already marked the toothpicks with a ballpoint pen, and was ushering everyone to make their picks. "In order to speed things up, we'll divide into two groups. There are two toothpicks with marks, and three without marks."

I instinctively looked at the sailor-suit clad Nagato, who was quietly sipping away at her fruit juice, while studying the menu before her. If I couldn't be grouped together with Nagato, that was all right.

Everything would be fine as long as I was grouped together with Koizumi.

"Come on, draw your lot!"

Haruhi said as she shoved five toothpicks in my face.

"Are you hesitating because you're not willing to be in a same group with someone? Hohoho. Who'd you like to be with then? You're so childish!"

Haruhi's smile resembled that of my neighbor, who in turn resembled a certain man-eating female ghost who lived in the attic. Thinking back about it, according to Asahina-san (Michiru), I would be grouped together with Koizumi. That means that I would have to pick a marked toothpick, and the probability of doing so was 2 out of 5. According to the basic principles of probability, there was a higher chance of me picking an unmarked toothpick than a marked one. What if the principles of probability overrode Asahina-san's memory? If I indeed picked an unmarked toothpick, what could I do to tie up the present to Asahina-san's future?

Oh well, there was probably nothing I could do about it. Faced with a silent, thinking, unmoving me, Haruhi passed the toothpicks to the other three brigade members. After the others had made their picks, I was left with the final 2 toothpicks. I nervously glanced at the toothpick in Koizumi's hand. In his hand, Koizumi elegantly grasped a marked toothpick.

Now only Haruhi and I have yet to draw lots. Since Haruhi had a habit of picking the last lot, it would mean that it was my turn to draw a lot.

Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, I reached for Haruhi's fist and concentrated for about ten seconds.

"That's a bit over the top, no?" Haruhi said with a bewildered expression on her face. That's what it may seem to you, but to me, it was more like sacred ritual. If everything didn't go as Asahina-san had said, I would be in trouble.

"Oh, whatever!" I yelled as my hand flew forward at godlike speed. I can't remember if it was my left hand or my right, all I remember was that I grabbed a lot based purely on intuition. But apparently that wasn't a good thing to do, as in my anxiety, I accidentally pulled both toothpicks out of Haruhi's fist.

Watching the two toothpicks fly out of Haruhi's fist, I initially thought, 'It's over.' Suddenly, one of the toothpicks fell on the table and began spinning horizontally. As I searched frantically for the second toothpick, I gazed up, only to see Haruhi grab it in midair.

I cautiously lowered my gaze to the toothpick on the table. There was a small, yet visible, mark on it, like a small speck of dirt.

"Oh, come on!" Haruhi said. "An all-guys and all-girls pairing? How boring!"

That's too bad. Truth to be told, the morning pairing really wasn't of much importance to me. If only Koizumi hadn't picked a marked toothpick, he would very well be grouped together with Asahina-san and Nagato. Since I couldn't allow this potential two-timing, it was vital that he and I pick a marked toothpick. That's why I calmed down after knowing I would be grouped together with Koizumi.

After that, all of us stood up and prepared to leave. Needless to say, it was my duty to settle the bill. A habit can be such a dangerous thing. How I loathe myself for picking up the bill so naturally!

"I'm sorry you have to do this again, Kyon-kun. Thank you." Asahina-san's apology was the only thing that made me feel better. Koizumi also said something to that effect, but when coupled together with such a situation, and a happy smile to boot, how could you expect me to feel appeased?

All he said was:

“If you ever run out of money, I can always find a part-time job for you.”

As I was about to leave the coffee shop, Koizumi approached me and told me more about this “job”.

“It’s an easy job, really. After you get used to it, I’m sure it’ll be a piece of cake for you. The salary is absurdly high too, this I can guarantee you.”

Thanks, but no thanks.

An image of a devil hiding behind that smiling face suddenly flashed into my mind, as I found myself signing a mysterious guest book and brought into a mysterious research facility. As I was blindfolded, modifications were done to my mind and body, allowing me to temporarily receive esper powers. I’m sorry, Koizumi, but I’ve had enough of sealed spaces. I don’t want to be stuck in another one of those gray worlds again, thank you.

“I’m also working on that part-time job. You can work too, if you wish. It’s not something stressful, don’t worry.”

I think I’ll leave that kind of work to you.

“Only you can do something like that,”

I quickly replied, trying to exit this conversation as soon as possible. I wish to remain a normal human without special powers, be it real or manufactured, thank you.

“Hmm…” Koizumi said as his lips curled upwards, revealing a smile.

“If you ever change your mind, be sure to give me a call. I can teach you the basics, and even go beyond that, if you wish.”

For some reason, Koizumi’s choice of words sounded strange and peculiar today. I had a feeling that he would be mentioning something I didn’t like should I play along with him, and for that one reason alone my gut told me to reject his offer all the way till the end, lest I end up falling into a trap. Sometimes, a man’s just gotta trust his gut.

Haruhi was waiting for me outside the coffee shop.

“Meet here at 12.”

Nagato was positioned at Haruhi’s right, as Haruhi curled her left arm around Asahina-san’s waist, grinning maniacally.

“Listen up. I don’t care what it is, you have to uncover something mysterious today! Maybe you could try the sewers, since we’ve never been there before, or try counting the number of stripes in pedestrian crossings to see if they’ve mysteriously increased! As long as you put your hearts into it, I’m sure you’ll be able to find something interesting! If you do something half-heartedly, you’ll never achieve anything!”

You know, you’ve been the target of two aliens and a time traveler now, and yet you’re still in the dark about it… Oh, I give up.

Now if I were competing in a scavenger hunt, and the object I was supposed to seek was “something strange”, the first thing that I would drag all the way to the finish line would be Haruhi. Come to think of it, someone normal like me being a member of the mystery-ridden SOS Brigade was perhaps the strangest thing of all. While Haruhi pressured us to look for “mysterious things”, I found myself wishing for nothing more than a normal high school life. Reality is always so paradoxical, it seems.

Haruhi dragged Nagato and Asahina-san across the streets and parted ways with us. I tightened my scarf and turned to Koizumi.

“So where do mysterious things appear?”

We had two hours to search for something mysterious. In this freezing cold weather, Koizumi smiled and said coolly, “Even if I were to tell you where, I’m sure you wouldn’t like it. Nor am I willing to go to such a place. Let’s just take this opportunity to take a stroll and chit-chat a little.”

Koizumi was surprisingly quiet the whole time. All we did was look at some carp in an aquarium, before proceeding to flip through some magazines at the convenience store. No matter how you look at it, both of us looked like ordinary high school students.

As for the dialog exchanged between us, this was mostly limited to stuff like the term-end exams, the drama shows which aired yesterday, and the sort. Hearing him talk so casually did nothing, but increase my suspicion. Or was I wrong?

“I want to become someone who appears to be a normal high school student on the outside, but in reality is an esper on the inside. That’s why, in my opinion, appearances are very important.”

Koizumi spoke as we slowly crossed the streets. “I never once thought that I would be an esper forever. Sometimes, I wish that I could just gift wrap my esper powers and give them to someone else, freeing myself of both my powers and my burden.”

Am I supposed to be relieved upon hearing that?

Koizumi smiled at me and continued. “I don’t have these thoughts often, only sometimes. If I were given the choice right now, I would undoubtedly choose for things to remain how they are. Being able to come in contact with cosmic beings, being able to communicate with those from

beyond this time plane; I don't think there's anything more amazing and awe-inspiring than that. But of course, your experiences far outweigh mine."

If I were you, I'd include you in those 'amazing and awe-inspiring' experiences.

"From my point of view, even though being an esper is strange and unexplainable, it's neither amazing nor awe-inspiring. One day, I'm going to graduate from being a high school student, provided that Suzumiya-san does not repeat her grade. That's why I try to enjoy life as it is right now, both as a high school student and as an esper."

All I want to do is enjoy a peaceful high school life. However, I will say that you're pretty praiseworthy of your actions during the summer and winter co-ed incidents.

"That's because I've been a member of the 'Organization' for about 4 years now. If I hadn't received any esper powers at that time, I would not have transferred into North High, and would probably be engaged in some activity that does not concern the fate of the world right now."

"Isn't that supposed to be a good thing?"

As the traffic lights turned green, both of us proceeded to cross the streets.

"I have no idea if I transferred here due to my esper powers or some other-worldly powers, but it doesn't really matter, right? I'm already here, after all. And although you constantly say that the SOS Brigade is a silly club, you've never once regretted joining it, have you? If you were truly fed up with it, you could write a letter of resignation. I suppose I could help you hand it over to Suzumiya-san."

Koizumi said this as his lips curled upwards, as if mocking me.

"Just forget it."

Koizumi ignored me and continued on with an amused voice.

"You're like a totally different person now. I still remember the first time meeting you and Suzumiya-san, and the good vibes I felt from all of you back then. And then, I was promoted to Vice-Commander… But let's just forget about that for a moment. Do you still remember what I said during the Snow Mountain incident?"

Of course I do. Even if you eventually forget it someday, I'll never forget it for the rest of my life. And if you dare to go back on your word, I'll make sure to combine forces with Haruhi and crush you with full force.

"I'm greatly relieved then. Even if I do contract amnesia one day, at least someone will be there to remind me about it."

Koizumi smiled as he said:

“Nagato-san almost said, ‘I hope such a situation won’t befall all of you again,’ back then. If something like that ever happens again, I’ll surely help all of you out, so don’t worry.”

Upon hearing this, I suddenly felt relieved that aside from Nagato, there was somebody else I could rely on. “I think this goes without saying, but the desire to protect Asahina-san has always been present within everyone. Without knowing it, you suddenly get the urge to protect her. I think this also qualifies as a ‘power’, no?”

After crossing the streets, Koizumi abruptly stopped and looked at his watch. Taking a hint, I too looked at my watch, and found out that we had in fact been strolling around for quite some time. It was almost time for us to gather again. Just as I was about to head for the station, Koizumi suddenly said softly,

“As for the other Asahina-san, although I will be protecting her as a part of the ‘Organization’, please be careful. That Asahina-san may be different from the other Asahina-sans.”

Asahina-san (Big)’s image suddenly popped in my mind, as I continued on forward without turning back. Even though Koizumi’s voice grew fainter and fainter, I could still make out what he was trying to say. “She is, to us —- The SOS Brigade—- more than a simple mascot.”

That may be so. After all, you were the first one to tell me so. “That’s why,”

I said,

“Even if the future were to change, I don’t care. What’s important is it should start changing now.”

When Koizumi and I reached the station, the other three were already there waiting for us. “Did you find anything mysterious?” was what Haruhi first asked. I’m sorry Haruhi, but even if we had really looked, I doubt that we would have found anything.

“No.”

That was the only logical answer, followed up with “Same goes with the three of you. You guys didn’t find anything either right? That makes us even.”

“You’re right, we didn’t spot anything mysterious.”

Haruhi replied without sighing or flying into a rage. She must be really happy today.

“But we did have fun, trying out the various food samples offered in the supermarket, didn’t we?” Haruhi happily asked Asahina-san.

“Y-Yea!” Asahina-san agreed as she nodded, and for a split second, her fluttering hair reminded me of the crimson butterflies which were flying about in my house’s garden right now. “We saw many interesting things, and even bought some new tea!”

Asahina-san had a very contented look on her face, as if she had just gone on a shopping spree. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that Nagato had a plastic bag, which bore the label of a bookshop, in her hand. Come on, do you guys really think that there’ll be something mysterious in a shopping mall?

Unless you’re talking about mystery books, which can be found in the book store, of course.

“Oh well, it’s not that bad.”

Asahina-san said, as if unsatisfied. “If we do things in a rush, we may regret it later on. The more anxious we are, the more slowly we should try to handle things. It’s the same with driving. If we frequently accelerate, when something happens, we won’t be able to brake in time, as opposed to if we didn’t accelerate. Things like this happen because we never thought they would, and when they really do, problems arise.”

I don’t get your logic here.

15 Daruma dolls, also known as dharma, are hollow and round Japanese wish dolls with no arms or legs, modelled after Bodhidharma. Typical colors are red (most common), yellow, green, and white. The doll has a face with a moustache and beard, but its eyes only contain the color white. Using black ink, one fills in a single circular eye while thinking of a wish. Should the wish later come true, the second eye is filled in.

“It’s not an easy theory, is it, Kyon.” Haruhi suddenly said. “The same can be said with a Daruma doll[15]. You would think that it wouldn’t stop rocking, and when you finally look away for that one second, it suddenly stops. That’s how mysterious things work. If you don’t turn back and look at it at the right moment, you’ll miss it altogether. You need to grasp the right moment, that’s what we mean by chance, Kyon. Chance.”

I’m getting lost here. I have no idea what’s going on in Haruhi’s brain, but the way she worded it, it was as if she wanted me to grasp my goddess’ hair the moment it began fluttering in the wind. It’s impossible, I tell you. The only person who can grasp something as abstract as that is someone who is fed information from the future.

“Come to think of it, where should we have lunch?”

That’s how you answer my question?

“I know of a new Italian restaurant which just opened opposite the bank. I’ve scanned the menu once, and from the looks of it, it looks really delicious. So, shall we get a table for five?”

It seems that Haruhi has totally dodged the question. I felt like a Buddhist Monk reciting Holy Scriptures to a nearby cow. Aside from increasing my karma, doing so served no purpose, as no matter how I tried, the cow would not be swayed. Sometimes, I feel that the same goes with Haruhi.

"I have no problems with that. What about you, Koizumi?"

16 Insalata Caprese (Salad in the style of Capri) is a simple salad of sliced fresh mozzarella, plum tomatoes and basil from the Italian region of Campania. It is seasoned with salt, black pepper, and olive oil. The main ingredients are similar to Pizza Margherita, but are not cooked. The dish represents the main colours of the Italian flag.

I wondered what would happen if Koizumi suddenly put on a face and said, 'I'm sorry but I can't stand 'Insalata Caprese[16].' Of course, this would never happen, as Koizumi would never say no to anything that popped out of Haruhi's mouth. All he did was smile and reply with a joyful 'Sure'.

"It's decided then." Haruhi said, as if giving us the signal that we needn't run round the city meaninglessly anymore and could finally sit down and enjoy a meal. When we reached the restaurant and were finally seated, I found my body aching all over, no thanks to Haruhi.

Sometimes I wonder if I worry about that girl too much, just like I sometimes wonder if I'm being too nice to Shamisen. Whenever I see her looking down and depressed, I would worry about her, and think that it would be much better if she remained energetic all the time. I wonder if one day Haruhi would become just like the glass of warm water before me – neither too hot, nor too cold; neither too energetic, nor too quiet.

As I wondered about this, my eyes shot instinctively towards Haruhi, who had already gulped down her glass of water in three seconds, and was asking the waiter for refills. Just like how it would take time for Asahina-san (Small) to grow up into someone like Asahina-san (Big), it would also take time for Haruhi to become someone like that.

17 An Italian dish which includes a specially-prepared rice called 'risotto', served with chicken or beef stock and saffron, and usually together with osso buco, a stew made from veal (cattle) bones.

After ordering Today's Special ('Risotto alla Milanese'[17]), I felt my wallet deflate completely, as Haruhi once again began marking the toothpicks.

This was it, the most important moment of the day. It was because Asahina-san was concerned that I felt so anxious. Up until now, I had been constantly worrying whether Asahina-san (Michiru) would show up at the prearranged spot. Please be there!

As I glanced around me, the first person to have finished her meal, now silently studying the menu, was none other than Nagato. She looked as if she was keenly interested in the toothpicks

in Haruhi's hand. Since I had asked for her help earlier, I knew that I needn't worry, as I confidently went first and picked a toothpick.

A marked one, as always.

Nagato went next, gracefully pulling out another marked toothpick. Without uttering a word, she placed the toothpick on the table, and returned to the menu.

"I guess there's no need to continue drawing lots," Haruhi said as she stuffed the remaining three toothpicks in the ashtray. Without complaining or crying foul play, Haruhi picked up the bill and began studying it. Since there was no way Haruhi would treat us, each of us paid for our own share and we left. Emerging into the cool winter air, the five of us strolled aimlessly on the streets, like fish swimming here and there in the ocean.

As Haruhi, Asahina-san, and Koizumi went their way, Nagato and I headed for a different path. Or more specifically, the two of us headed towards the place I had arranged to meet up with Asahina-san (Michiru).

Whenever I walk together with Nagato, my mind drifts back to the first time I walked with her like this last spring, back when she was still wearing glasses, without a sliver of emotion on her ice cold poker face. Come to think of it, it was then that Nakagawa noticed us.

As I walked, I found Nagato silently following me two steps behind. Because I couldn't detect her presence, I had to constantly turn back to make sure that she was still there. Of course, she would always return my gaze with an expressionless face.

I'm sure both of us felt a sense of nostalgia, as we were headed for a place we'd both remember – the public library. After I brought her here for the first time, while she was still wearing glasses, it seemed that Nagato frequently visited this place. For both me and Nagato, this was one memorable place indeed.

This time is no different from the other, aside from the fact that Nagato had already obtained a library card, and is no longer wearing glasses. The both of us headed silently towards the library, without uttering a single word, yet not feeling the slightest bit awkward. For me, silence was gold, and speech was silver. If it were Haruhi or Koizumi we were talking about, then I would have thought that they were up to something, but since it was Nagato, I fully acknowledge her silence as a positive point.

Immersed in silence, we entered the library, and then I paused to gaze around looking for someone. As I spotted her sitting on a sofa, Asahina-san stood up and walked towards me, as if wanting to save me the trouble of walking.

Asahina-san was wearing Tsuruya-san's favorite jacket, a flowery muffler, and a straw hat. Upon seeing who I was with, Asahina-san (Michiru)'s eyes grew large, as she said, "Kyon-kun… A-Ah… Nagato-san…"

Since I was in a library, I mimicked Asahina-san's actions by placing my finger upon my lips, before toning down my voice and saying, "Tsuruya-san's not here, is she?"

"No, she's not,"

Asahina-san said as she glanced nervously behind my back. You don't have to be that afraid, you know.

"Tsuruya-san said she had something to do today, so she couldn't come with me here, however…"

Asahina-san nervously twirled her fingers,

"She arranged for a car to transport me here, and even gave me some money to take a cab back home…"

I was slightly disturbed by the fact that Tsuruya-san couldn't follow her to the library, but was even more disturbed by Asahina-san's large eyes. I turned around, wondering if there was anything else behind me, like a vengeful spirit or the sort, other than Nagato.

"…"

Nagato looked at Asahina-san, without any trace of expression on her face. I suddenly recalled that when I told Nagato to help me manipulate the outcome of the lot drawing…

I had totally forgotten to tell her why.

Oh crap.

"A-Ah, Nagato, you see…"

"…"

With Asahina-san clad in such an outfit, I don't think the "She's her identical twin!" story would fool anyone, never mind Nagato.

"This is another Asahina-san."

"I know."

Nagato said without looking the least bit shocked.

"O-Oh, that's right, I've introduced her to you before!"

"E-Erm…"

"…"

"I'm sorry. Really sorry."

Why was the librarian looking at me, who was sandwiched between an apologizing Asahina-san and an ice-cold Nagato, with such weird eyes? I doubt I'll forget them even after three days. What was she thinking?

Ten seconds later, Nagato said,

"Is that so?"

I looked at Nagato, as her chin drooped down that millionth of a centimeter for a split second. It seemed that she had approved.

I took this opportunity to briefly explain what I had to do. "I have to head somewhere with this Asahina-san to accomplish something important. After we're done, I'll be back for you. Can you wait here?"

"I'll wait for you," was all she said, as if understanding my current situation.

After watching Nagato return a book that was as thick as my pillow back to a crammed bookshelf, I turned towards Asahina-san and said,

"Let's go, Asahina-san."

I once again turned back to see Nagato disappear within the bookshelves. The clock on the wall read two o'clock.

"…Erm… Kyon-kun…" Asahina-san said with a tone that suggested she was having great difficulty getting her words out, "You brought Nagato-san here without telling her anything, didn't you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I had completely forgotten about that."

"No… That's not it…" Asahina-san said as she shook her head.

"Nagato-san is probably angry at you now."

Huh? I'm sorry, but how do you put it? From the tone of her voice, it seemed that even Asahina-san was angry at me now! No, that's not it. Nagato wouldn't be angry at someone —- Gah, I give up. A sigh escaped my lips.

"I don't really care, but… Kyon-kun, you have to apologize to Nagato-san after we're done, okay?"

Asahina-san put her ‘senpai’ charm to full use as she made that statement. After that, as we left the library, Asahina-san glanced at the road without saying anything, leaving a very confused me behind.

Where should we go now, and what should we do, you ask? It would seem that the only logical course of action is to follow the instructions on the letter in my pocket.

As the wind blew through the trees, we both walked in silence. Did my body feel cold due to the coldness of winter? Or was it due to me walking beside Asahina-san and still managing to find time to read every single house number plate we passed by, instead of attempting to talk to her? From Asahina-san’s footsteps, I could tell that she too was pretty anxious.

We were almost at our destination, as the aforementioned bridge loomed close.

I read the letter one last time, confirming that we were at the right bridge. As Asahina-san and I stopped before the bridge, we were amazed by the entire array of blooming flowers.

The flowers were extremely pretty, making the flowers that grew on the path up to North High look like a joke. These were the flowers that bloomed despite the harshness of the winter, and deep inside my heart, I felt proud of them. Some had even blossomed completely, making me wonder if I were to search in this large, 10 meter flower patch, would I end up like yesterday, with nothing much save a face full of dirt?

Careful not to let the wind carry the letter away, I read it again.

“We have to find it within…”

If we were to search every nook and corner of this flower patch, it would be really time consuming, and I hadn’t taken that time into account.

“No, I don’t think it’ll take much time at all,”

Asahina-san said as she pointed at one corner of the flower patch.

“There’s only one area where purple common stock grow.”

I felt highly embarrassed for not even knowing the common name of flowers. As I peered in the direction Asahina-san pointed, all I could see were some small bluish flowers waving in the wind.

18 Also known as Adonis amurensis, a small, yellow flower. They are called fukuju (福寿草)in Japanese.

“Those yellow flowers are Pheasant’s Eyes[18], while the violet ones there are Persian Violets. As for those, erm, I think they’re Hairy Violets.”

I was shocked, and greatly impressed, by Asahina-san's knowledge of flowers.

"While attending class here, I learned a lot of things. One of them was about botany and the names of flowers."

I'm saved then. Yesterday's treasure hunt was like looking for a needle in a haystack. At least now I know specifically where to look.

"Please be careful not to tread on the flowers."

I took Asahina-san's request seriously, and proceeded with care towards the patch of common stock. It seemed that Asahina-san cared deeply about these flowers which bloomed in the winter. I peered down from above the patch of flowers.

The letter asked for a transmitter, which would be present here. Purging all doubt from my mind, I began looking. If time travelers from the future said it would be here, then it would definitely be here. If it weren't for that fact, what I was doing was no different from a servant following his master's order.

Asahina-san looked at me from the side, as I dived into the patch of common stock, and cautiously turned every stem and leaf. Although there weren't many cars or people who passed by this place, if someone else saw me, I wouldn't blame them for thinking that I was ruining the flower patch. All I hoped for while searching in the flower patch was for a patrol car to not pass by.

And so, thirty minutes passed. I brushed off the dirt on my fingertips on my pants, and proceeded to wipe off my sweat with the back of my hand.

That's strange.

I couldn't find anything, even after inspecting every single common stock growing there. I even took the liberty of searching beneath the Persian Violets and Hairy Violets.

But aside from rocks, I couldn't find anything that was man-made, never mind a future transmitter.

While I was searching, Asahina-san also joined me in my search, just in case I missed a spot. However, even with four eyes searching, we still couldn't find anything.

"What's going on…?" If we didn't find anything here, Asahina-san (Big) would have surely known of it, no? Since Asahina-san (Michiru) had been searching by my side all this time, it was impossible that Asahina-san (Big) didn't know about it. There would be no meaning to sending me that letter then.

"What should we do, Kyon-kun?"

Asahina-san looked at me as if she were about to burst into tears any moment now.

“If we don’t find it, it’ll be very troublesome for us. The first of the secret commands was the harshest, stating that it was crucial I find the device. If I don’t do so accordingly…”

Asahina-san’s scarf had already loosened, but she paid no attention to it, or should I say, she didn’t even notice. The look on her face was even more terrified than when she had encountered Nagato with me in the library, and upon seeing her face, I began to panic. Just as I was about to search the flowerbeds again, someone called out from behind my back —- “Is this what you’re looking for?”

The voice definitely didn’t come from someone I knew. It was deep and hoarse, and before I knew it, I had already spun around. Sometimes, the body does react faster than the mind. I stretched both my arms open, as if protecting Asahina-san behind my back, and looked at the source of the voice.

The voice came from someone who was positioned roughly five or six steps away from me. He was almost the same height as I was, and his face was of a complete stranger’s. Although it was the first time we had met, I knew that deep down something was wrong with him. He had an extremely detestable face, one that made you hate him even though you had just met him moments ago.

The stranger held up a board-shaped object by his fingertips, as if picking up something dirty. It was jet black, and resembled the object from the drawings.

“It looks so boring, waddling in the flowerbeds just for the sake of that girl’s future. I wouldn’t do it if I were you.”

The stranger’s lips curled upwards slightly. Even though I’m pretty dim, I knew that he was making fun of me.

“You’re a strange guy.”

He said as he looked at me with disrespectful eyes.

“I don’t know why are you wasting your time doing useless stuff like this. Don’t you have other, better things to do?”

Due to my experiences this last year, I had developed a sixth sense capable of detecting danger, and right now it told me that things weren’t too good.

Come to think of it, what good was sensing danger if all I would do was smile and think, “Oh this is bad?” Now that I had identified the danger, it was time to think of a suitable course of action.

As expected, I couldn't think of any. There was no choice, then. The only thing I could do was ask, "Erm, where did you get that from?"

Upon hearing my question, the stranger snickered. "Oh, in that flowerbed you're standing on, before you guys arrived. It was pretty obvious, and all I had to do was walk over there and pick it up."

"Give it to me." I said trying to look as fierce as possible. However, the stranger merely laughed at my feeble attempt.

"Why should I give you something that isn't even yours? Aren't we supposed to hand lost items like this to the police?"

"Why don't I send it over, or even better, why don't you just give it to me for safekeeping? I'll hand it back to its original owner for you. Isn't that even better?"

"Hmm…" The stranger said as he sneered.

"Do you think the owner's address is written on that letter you have there? How can you be sure? Did you ask that alien friend of yours?"

This guy knows about Nagato? No, wait. How did he know about the letter in the first place? I'm sure the only ones who have seen it are Asahina-san and me!

This can only mean one thing. This guy…

Behind me, Asahina-san had grabbed my wrists and was slowly shaking them. Without turning back, I asked the panicking Asahina-san:

"Do you know this guy, Asahina-san?"

"No…" Asahina-san said while shaking her head. "I haven't even met him before… I know no such person…"

"It doesn't matter who I am. It's not like I'm going to eat the both of you up anyways, although I would greatly like to do so."

I was getting bad vibes from this guy. His smile was more of a grimace, one that I had never seen on even Koizumi's face before. From his detestable face and annoying smile, I could clearly feel a sense of malevolence coming from him.

What should I do? Should I fight for the transmitter? If this guy wasn't a normal human, there was almost no way I could defeat him, even if Asahina-san and I were to attack him two versus one. I should have brought Nagato along, damn it!

I clenched my fists, as two thoughts raced through my brain. Should I fight, or should I call for reinforcements?

“Hmph.”

The stranger’s smile vanished off his face, and was replaced by a look of extreme boredom. With a flick of his finger, he flicked the transmitter towards me, as the small, black, board-like item traveled through the air in a trajectory course. Before it landed on the ground, I quickly shot forward to catch it.

“Take it then. It’s something I have to do after all. Do as you wish with it, and you can follow those silly orders for all I care. Continue to do as the time travelers tell you to, if you really want to.”

I looked at the object in my arms, which resembled a digital camera’s memory card, albeit one which I had never seen before. I couldn’t tell if it was dirty after being placed in the flowerbed, or if that was its original color.

Ah, whatever. Most importantly, it was safely in my hands right now. The thing which I had to worry about was this guy before us now.

“Who the heck are you, and how did you know we would be here?”

“Hmph.”

The guy’s sneer became more apparent.

“Aren’t you the same? What are you doing here? Why have you come all the way here? Why? Aren’t I supposed to ask you that first?”

Seeing someone who was roughly of the same age as I behave so arrogantly made my anger boil. However, I knew that I couldn’t let my anger get the best of me. Now was not the time to do things according to my own feelings.

Plus, Asahina-san was tightly hugging me, apparently very much intimidated by the stranger.

“The person you should be questioning isn’t me.”

The stranger said, as his gaze fell onto the figure by my side.

“Isn’t that so? Asahina Mikuru?”

I tightly held Asahina-san’s hand, as she continued to clutch onto my jacket.

“W-What do you mean? I d-don’t know you… Where have you…”

The stranger's smile turned into a frown.

"I see… It's your first time meeting me eh. Treat this as 'Nice to meet you' then. But to me, I've already met you several times now. You get what I mean Asahina Mikuru?"

I never loathed someone so much in my life before, as I found myself being pushed to the limits. From the malice in this guy's eyes, it was obvious that he viewed Asahina-san as his enemy.

I may be mistaken, but I definitely felt that he was human. I've never met someone who so openly showed his animosity before. I never liked him from the first time I saw him, and it seemed that he had no intentions of hiding his hatred either, as he openly made snide remarks. I hate these type of characters, and I was sure Haruhi did too.

"If you have anything you want to say, just spit it out."

Whenever someone suspicious appeared before me, I would find myself toughening up. The only person I would allow to babble such crap would be Koizumi. I continued, as my voice became firm, "If there's anything you need from me, just say it out loud. Do you need me to relay a message to Haruhi? Or how about I introduce you to her, huh?"

"There's no need for me to meet with Suzumiya Haruhi."

Upon hearing his reply, I was initially shocked, but quickly got over it. I thought that this guy had some business with Haruhi. Apparently I was wrong.

"I am different from Asahina Mikuru,"

The stranger said as he shifted his eyes, gazing at the time traveler of the SOS Brigade, then shifting them towards me.

"You should think twice before following her orders so blindly. Reality is not just bound to you only. The same rules used to apply to me. That memory chip is an important artifact to the future. As long as you picked it up with your own hands, the future will not change no matter who obtains it. Isn't that so?"

No, I'm afraid I don't agree. I've been following my schedule pretty tightly until now, and that schedule clearly doesn't state the appearance of a stranger like you.

"You're pretty dim, aren't you? Don't you get it? What you're doing won't make much difference. Why am I here, you ask? Well, what do you think I'm here for?"

"How the hell would I know," I responded without thinking. I'm sorry, but I'm not the one who usually does the thinking in the SOS Brigade. If you want a detailed deduction, I'll just have to refer you to our Vice-Commander instead.

"I decline, seeing as I don't plan to do so."

What a cold answer. The stranger retreated, as if being carried by the wind. “The only reason I’m here today is to meet you and play with you. It’s a predetermined event, anyway. I’m not sure which future agenda you follow, but the one thing we time travelers must all adhere to is the prohibition of interfering with the past. Hmph!”

After saying what he had to say, the stranger turned and quickly left. Geez, what an impolite fellow. Not even bothering to introduce himself, all he did was show up and spout some nonsense only he would understand. For a moment I wondered if I should pursue him, but I decided to let it slide.

Asahina-san stood behind me like a statue, her hands were closed tightly around my wrists, and it seemed that she had sprouted roots for legs, as she stood there unmoving. All she did was gaze at the despicable fellow, as he turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

“Kyaa~”

As if losing all her strength, my petite senpai fell limp all of a sudden. I hurriedly supported her with my body. Asahina-san stuck to me, as if wanting to leech my body heat, but for some reason, I wasn’t the least bit happy.

“Asahina-san, do you really not recognize that fellow?”

I asked a wobbling Asahina-san, who had at least regained the strength to stand. “…He’s probably… another time traveler…” Asahina-san said softly.

That was exactly what I thought. If I were to put it in words, I would say that he shared a similar aura with Asahina-san, and based on my skills of deduction, I had come to the same conclusion. However, I had absolutely no idea why he had come all the way to the past. He had specifically come to this area and picked up something important to us, and I don’t think his motive was to see me and Asahina-san crawl around in the flowerbeds for thirty minutes.

A new time traveler. One that held feelings of animosity towards Asahina-san.

For some reason, this thought made me shiver more than the freezing winter wind. Just like how there were different cosmic entities present, it seemed that time travelers had their different agendas. Call me paranoid, but I also suspected that Koizumi’s ‘Organization’ had some inner conflicts within it. What these factions had done up until now, I have no idea. All I knew was that they were beginning to step on the stage, slowly revealing themselves to us.

“So there are different types of time travelers after all…” I sighed. As if wanting to reply me, Asahina-san opened her mouth and said, “Erm… Well…” Unfortunately, that was all that she said, as she hurriedly shut it, before proceeding to open it again. Her eyes drooped low, as she said:

“I’m sorry, it’s classified information. Even if I wanted to tell you, I’m prohibited from doing so.”

Don’t worry, it’s fine with me. Don’t think of it too much.

“B-But… This is something important. That guy may just show up anytime again… And maybe even during unstable periods like this…”

Unstable?

“Yes, unstable. I’m supposed to be with Suzumiya-san in this current time period. Since he saw me here, it could have messed things up…”

That kinda makes sense.

I once again took out the crumpled letter from my pocket and began reading it. If, according to Asahina-san (Big), Asahina-san and I meeting with that guy was a predetermined event, the only way that would be possible, with Asahina-san (Mikuru) still being together with Haruhi and Koizumi would be to arrange for Asahina-san (Michiru) to be together with me when the event triggered.

The memory chip in my hand was probably covered in sweat right now. Although it seemed that luck was on our side, seeing that the stranger returned the chip to us, I felt that I had a pretty bad day today, running into someone like him. As I pocketed the object, I once again felt rage building up within me. Even though we had just parted, whenever I thought of that guy’s sneering face, I would be boiling all over. Someone who wanted to harm Asahina-san, and was even equipped with a pass to hop between the past, the present and the future, was way beyond my league. Even so, I definitely wouldn’t allow him to, and I’m sure Tsuruya-san wouldn’t either. Haruhi would probably never forgive him, and the same goes without saying for Nagato and Koizumi.

“Will we meet him again?”

“I suppose so.”

Asahina-san said so with terrified eyes, which were still darting around in fear, as if she was looking out for something. The only consolation for the day was that Asahina-san still didn’t notice she was clinging tightly onto my wrists.

“That person said something about a predetermined event… He must be similar to me. Furthermore…”

Asahina-san abruptly stopped, leaving her sentence hanging in midair. Classified information?

“Yeah.”

Asahina-san finally detached her body from mine.

“I’ve never seen such a bad guy before. What about you, Kyon-kun?”

No matter how I look at it, or how I think of it, he still drives me mad. I hated him for shouting at Asahina-san and me. It was bad enough to shout at me, but at Asahina-san too? Oh forget it, it’s probably the first time anyone has done so anyway. Nice to meet you? Nice my ass!

Since we wasted most of our time unintentionally destroying the flowerbeds and meeting up with that strange fellow, it was already three in the afternoon. Haruhi had requested that we meet at four. Even if I dragged Nagato from the library and brought her to the station, there would still be some time remaining. I couldn’t just let Asahina-san hail a cab all on her own seeing that the person driving the cab may very well be one of our enemies. At this thought, that sneering bastard’s face came into mind.

Even if my heart bleeds at my lost cash, I had no choice but to sit on the same cab with Asahina-san, and after leaving her at Tsuruya-san’s residence, board the same cab back to the library.

As I hailed down a cab and boarded it with Asahina-san, Asahina-san suddenly asked me: “Erm, what is Tsuruya-san’s house address again?”

“Erm, I’m not too sure myself. Which street was it on again?”

Hearing our conversation, the young driver turned back and told us politely: “Do you mean the big Tsuruya mansion? If that’s the case, you can leave everything to me.”

Wow, you’re great, Tsuruya-san. It was a good thing she was the only one with the Tsuruya surname in this area. This way, I would be able to save back on the costs of making a phone call.

The driver was a really talkative guy. He knew from a glance that we were high school students, and could even tell which grade we were in. He then proceeded to tell us about how his son was still an elementary school kid, and how he planned to send him to a well established private high school. Before we knew it, we had already arrived at Tsuruya-san’s mansion.

After getting out of the cab, Asahina-san repeatedly thanked me and the driver, before disappearing within the walls of Tsuruya-san’s house. This way, it would be impossible for some new time traveler to harm Asahina-san. You can rest assured, Asahina-san, knowing that you’ll at least have someone to rely on.

“Please head to the library.”

I said to the driver, my tightened spirit finally being able to relax a little.

After I reached the library, I found Nagato already standing by the front counter waiting for me. Standing upright while reading such a thick hardback, I really admired her for not feeling the least bit tired.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“It’s okay.”

Nagato shut the book with a dull thud, before returning the book, which better resembled a dictionary to me, to the topmost shelf. After that, she walked to my side, as we hurriedly headed for the exit.

Fumbling with my fingers, I finally managed to pull out the memory chip from my pocket.

“Nagato, do you know what this is?”

Nagato turned her head and looked at the memory chip in my fingers, not bothering to stop as we headed out of the library.

While I was returning to the library just a while ago, I phoned Nagato to tell her about the past happenings, including the letters in my shoe locker, and the sneering bastard.

“…I see.”

Nagato nodded her head, without revealing a bit of emotion on her face, as she answered me in her usual monotonous voice.

“This is a broken memory chip. However, the data inside is still undamaged.”

As I looked at the chip again, I found that it was in fact broken in half. What was the use of it then, even though the data was preserved?

What kind of data is held within?

“Although the majority of the data is not lost, a major portion of it is nevertheless corrupted, and it seems that several crucial files have been either damaged or lost.”

So it contains something even Nagato has no idea about. If Nagato didn’t know about it, no human possibly would. I wondered who I was supposed to mail this to. Was he even human?

“Data restoration in progress. Attempting to replicate and substitute lost or damaged data with similar hits.” Nagato said, suggesting that she had already scanned the entire contents of the memory chip and was currently attempting to restore it to how it was before.

“Inferences can be formed.”

“This memory chip contains a myriad of damaged data. However, there are also two hundred and eighteen pieces of different data that has been recently input. This memory chip is meant to be inserted in a transmitter. If played in correct sequence, it is possible to formulate a basic theory.”

As I was about to ask Nagato what was she saying, Nagato said simply:

“Something that Asahina Mikuru is currently using: The basic foundation of time travel.”

“However…” Nagato continued,

“Even if someone obtained the data, based on our current level of technology, it would be impossible to deduce what the data meant. Although it is still insufficient for someone to formulate the basic theories of time travel based on it, it is crucial to time travel. Without it, it would be impossible for humans to travel through time. This chip contained the basic foundations for time travel, including the correct method to move through time planes and the sort.”

“Can someone come to this conclusion based on this memory chip?”

“Yes.” Nagato replied emotionlessly, without slowing her pace. Since she didn’t, I obviously couldn’t either. Although I suddenly had an overwhelming desire to hand the memory chip to her, seeing that it was a crucial thread of the time travelers’ fate, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“Of course, it could be a decoy.”

Since Nagato was the least likely to joke about such things, I took it seriously.

“This is not the only one. There must be other copies somewhere.”

Come to think about it, that kinda makes sense. Who in their right minds would leave something important like this in the hands of someone who just happened to pick it up? This was probably a decoy, whereas the real chip was already being ferried safely to who-knows-where. Asahina-san (Big)’s smiling face, with an eye closed and her index finger by her lips, suddenly surfaced in my mind. However, knowing Asahina-san (Big), she could have had some difficulties in doing that, and as such secretly sent me to do it for her.

“Oh, one more thing, Nagato.”

I said as I hurried to catch up to the short haired silhouette.

“Sorry for today.”

I’m sure Nagato’s footsteps slowed down, as she lifted her head and looked at me.

“It’s my fault for not telling you I would bring Asahina-san along today when I called you last night. Asking someone for help without explaining things clearly to them, how would I have felt if someone had done the same to me?”

Nagato looked at me without saying anything, as if I was being interrogated by those cold eyes. After walking about ten steps, I surrendered.

“Asahina-san told me to apologize to you. I’m sorry.”

“…Is that so?”

Nagato said as she looked at the road before her once again, and continued walking. About 5 seconds later, she said again:

“Is that so?”

Just outside the train station, Haruhi and Asahina-san looked like tired puppies, as they leaned on each other for support. Koizumi stood beside them, once again with a smile on his face.

After we had all gathered, it was time to report our findings of the day, as we entered the familiar coffee shop. Of course, the reports were always the same ever since last year. Although I did meet some strange guy, I didn’t tell Haruhi about him. Fortunately, “I didn’t discover anything strange or mysterious” didn’t warrant a scowl from Haruhi this time, which was something I was relatively new to.

“It’s fine, days like this are bound to happen anyway.”

I’d like to know what would happen other than days like this.

Seeing the way Haruhi drank her cup of cappuccino, I could tell that she is in a pretty good mood. “Let’s meet up again tomorrow. Those mysterious events are bound to not expect us looking for them for two days straight, and as such may let their guard down! I can feel something exciting happening tomorrow, like running into something paranormal just around the corner!”

For some reason, I suddenly recalled that incident where Asahina-san and I were shouted at by some stranger from behind. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that he had been monitoring us for some time then, and upon thinking about this, my glass of milkshake seemed to abruptly turn into a glass of black coffee. Just you wait, you sneering bastard! The next time I see you, I’ll bring you straight to Nagato or Haruhi, and let you feel their wrath!

I wonder if I really had a pained expression on my face, for Haruhi continuously looked at me, as if wanting to say something, but lacked the courage to say it. In the end, she didn’t do anything, other than reveal an unfathomable smile.

“So, we meet again tomorrow, understand? I believe that if we change the day, the situation will change too. If we keep sticking to the same schedule, wouldn’t that be boring? I have a feeling that mysterious things are easier to find on Sunday. Maybe it’s because Sunday gives you the impression that it’s meant for lazing off, which is something those mysterious things may be doing! Just like how I feel that I won’t be so friendly on Monday, I’m sure mysterious things will be lazing about on Sunday! I’m sure of it!”

So did that mean Haruhi’s mood was set according to what day it was? Oh well, it’s not like I’ll be able to get any rest tomorrow, seeing that we’d be having yet another city-wide search. But what am I fretting about, didn’t Asahina-san (Michiru) already tell me this before? The only thing that soothed my heart was Asahina-san giggling, as she talked to Haruhi about something.

“That’s all for today.”

Haruhi then gave us the command to dismiss, before reminding us to meet up again tomorrow.

I certainly had lots of things to think about today.

As I rode back home on my bike, various thoughts raced through my mind, from the things Koizumi said to me in the morning, to the two Asahina-sans; from the chattering, unknown stranger, to Nagato’s expressionless face, and last but not least, Haruhi’s bemused expression in the coffee shop. For one who had never been settled on by so many worries before, this was certainly a plague of troubles. But of course, I wasn’t someone who would let his worries get ahead of him. I still had things to do, I reminded myself, as I trudged through the snow towards the convenience store.

After purchasing an envelope and some stamps, I headed towards the shopping mall.

I entered the pet shop, and began looking at the different dogs and cats present there. Unlike Shamisen, these animals were of pure breed, and I found myself strangely fascinated by them. As I tried my best to pull myself away from the urge to purchase one of them, I dragged my body towards the turtle counter, and found out that the Chinese Box Turtle was pretty close with the Golden Coin Turtle. If possible, I would like to bring Asahina-san here one day. I could picture her picking up one of those adorable puppies, her eyes sparkling in the process, as she made a shout of “Kyaa~”. That was something I had seen my sister do before, and I had no doubt Asahina-san would be the same.

I lowered my gaze back at the counter, and began thinking, “Which one should I buy?” The turtles there were basically hunched together and resembled unmoving rocks. Each seemed to be fond of another, and I found it hard to separate them. I know that many people liked turtles, but sometimes I wonder if I really imagine too much. However, seeing that I was about to fling one of these poor guys into a freezing cold river tomorrow, I began questioning myself, which would they prefer? Being trapped in a small and crowded place like this, or set into the free but punishing wild?

As if realizing I was staring at him, one of the golden coin turtles quickly turned away and attempted to escape. However, maybe it was due to his poor balancing, he stumbled and fell into the water. Being in the cold water was probably an unpleasant thing for him though, as he quickly climbed back out to the safety of the land.

All right, it's you then.

I quickly motioned for the shop assistant and pointed at that turtle, before telling her that I wished to purchase it. The shop assistant, whom I have no idea if she's only working here or if this is her family's business, revealed a huge smile on her face, and quickly went to fetch a tank. After that, she began teaching me how to take care of turtles, what to feed them, etcetera. To tell you the truth, all of that didn't matter to me, since all I wanted to do was fling this poor guy into the river. But seeing her explain to me so patiently, I had no idea what I was supposed to say. When she asked me why I wanted to buy a turtle for a pet, I had wanted to tell her that it was something I couldn't tell her, something secret, something classified.

In the end, as I tried to make up a suitable explanation as to why I had wanted to buy a turtle, the shop assistant had already decorated the tank with several marbles, filled it with water, picked up the golden coin turtle, and placed him gently into the tank. "This comes free with the turtle," she said to me, smiling.

She was smiling as she led me all the way to the cash register. She must really like turtles.

"If there's anything you would like to know about turtles, you can come and find me anytime."

After that, I paid for the turtle, since the tank and turtle pellets came free with the turtle. I felt sorry for the turtle, who would most likely be thrown into the river tomorrow. Too bad, buddy. That's fate for you.

As I felt a slight pain in my chest, I carried the tank out of the shopping mall, placed it into the basket in front of my bicycle, and started pedaling. Even though it was already dark, I couldn't go home yet. There was somewhere else I had to go first.

"Hi, Kyon-kun! I knew you would come today! Good evening!"

Even though stars were shining in the sky, Tsuruya-san radiated a certain aura that made her stand out from them, as she opened her front door. I decided to park my bike inside Tsuruya-san's mansion this time.

"Huh? What's this? A souvenir?" Tsuruya-san said as her gaze fell upon the tank in my bicycle's basket. "Oh, it's a turtle, a turtle! Do you have them in your backyard too? I used to rear some in my pond, but then later felt sorry for them and released them into the wild!"

That's too bad Tsuruya-san, but this turtle isn't a present for you. It's something I got for Asahina-san to keep her company.

“Oh, that’s too bad, Kyon-kun. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to accompany Michiru-chan to the library today. Something important came up, you see.”

I parked my bike into Tsuruya-san’s front yard, before proceeding to take the tank out from the basket. I then asked Tsuruya-san:

“You had something to do again today?”

“Yea, we had to pay respects to one of my dead ancestors. This time, it was my father’s grandfather, as my various aunts and uncles talked about the old times before his grave. However, from what I heard, he used to be a really fun and jolly man. All of them looked as if they were enjoying themselves by recalling the good old days!”

Tsuruya-san had always loved to talk, and this time was no exception.

“Did anything worrisome happen to Michiru-chan? If you’re really that worried, why don’t you stay here for the night? I’ll be sleeping beside you too! Wouldn’t you like that ~nyoro?”

Tsuruya-san said this without looking the slightest bit nervous. She was like Cinderella asking her fairy godmother for a dress; asking me at my moment of weakness. Such simple traps won’t work on me, Tsuruya-san, and it seemed that Tsuruya-san understood that too. There was no way she would have said something like that otherwise.

“No thanks.”

I’m sure Tsuruya-san understood what I meant. Even if I agreed, I’m sure that being sandwiched in between two ravishing upperclassmen would probably derive me of all sleep. I’m tired enough, thank you. I don’t want another sleepless night.

Perhaps due to the cold weather, the golden coin turtle had withdrawn itself into its shell, and was hunched in a corner. Compared to throwing it into the freezing cold river, I would have preferred to let it live in Tsuruya-san’s pond, but alas, there was no way I could ignore Asahina-san (Big)’s order.

“K-Kyon-kun?”

Just as I was about to enter her room, I heard Asahina-san gently call my name, as she came out to greet me. There’s no way I would come for a visit after we’ve just barely parted. It’s just because I forgot to give you something that I came back to hand it to you.

Handing the tank to Asahina-san, I said, “Can you please bring this along with you tomorrow?” Hopefully she still remembered the contents of letter #4: “Tomorrow, please throw this turtle into the river before 10:50 AM.” This was the last task I had to accomplish with Asahina-san. Tomorrow, we would all meet again for a city-wide search at 9. After that, we would head to the coffee shop, have breakfast, and draw lots again. This would take presumably an hour. If Asahina-san could bring the turtle to the river for me, it would save me much time and energy.

Plus, if I brought this to the station, Haruhi and the others would probably ask me what I was up to.

“Erm, yeah, that’s it…” Asahina-san said as she took the tank from me. “Kyon-kun didn’t bring anything to the meeting on Sunday either.”

For a moment I thought I heard a dry cough. I turned, only to see Tsuruya-san place some snacks on the table, before closing her eyes, as if saying, ‘I didn’t hear anything.’

“Do you need me to send Michiru-chan there tomorrow?”

“Are you fine with that?”

After hearing my counter-question, Tsuruya-san answered coolly, “Ahaha~ I happen to have more family affairs tomorrow, so I’m afraid I can’t send her there in person. But don’t worry. I’ll have someone drive Michiru-chan there, okay? Just tell me what time you wish for.”

“10:45 AM tomorrow, near the riverbank where cherry-blossom trees grow. Asahina-san knows about the place, too. Thanks a lot.”

Provided Asahina-san doesn’t contract amnesia, she should remember the bench by the cherry-blossom trees.

“Okay, you can leave it all to me! You can hail a cab if you want to come back!” Tsuruya-san said as she beat her chest proudly.

“I understand your feelings Kyon-kun. Choosing not to stroll by the busy streets, where you would meet obstacles every 200 meters, that’s a wise choice! You should feel happy about this, Michiru-chan!”

I felt that Tsuruya-san was the only one feeling happy about this.

“I think Michiru already has a crush on someone. I’m kinda worried about her, since she’s so naïve and all. Now if I knew who the person was, and if he was a good guy or not, then I would be greatly relieved.”

Upon hearing that statement, I felt uneasy. I think about those things every day. Every single day.

“Ahaha~ Isn’t there any way to make Kyon-kun calm down?”

Even though I wanted to say “There is,” I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Asahina-san was already blushing furiously, apparently embarrassed by Tsuruya-san’s words, as she twirled her fingers in her lap. I had decided long ago to protect Asahina-san, not only the Asahina-san who currently resided in my time plane, but all other Asahina-sans. I don’t care what happens to me then. Apparently, Tsuruya-san knew of this too.

This is the turtle we're going to use tomorrow. That was what ran through my mind, as I looked at Asahina-san, hoping to relay that message to her, while silently gulping down Tsuruya-san's tea. Asahina-san looked at the turtle swimming around in the tank, and let out a series of soft giggles. Would this Asahina-san remain here forever? If things continue on like this, Asahina-san (Small) will be dragged in this too. Eight days —- No wait, three days now —- later, would I really have to send Asahina-san (small) back to the past?

Thinking about this, I suddenly thought of the series of letters I had been receiving recently - #3, #4 and #6. Why had #6 suddenly popped up after #4? By now, I had no doubt that this was not a printing error. #5 must be out there somewhere. It was only that I hadn't received it yet.

I hadn't told Asahina-san about letter #6 yet, simply because it had specifically told me to keep it a secret from Asahina-san. "When everything is over, please head over to the bench where you and I met during the festival of Tanabata. I'll be waiting."

I was grateful that Tsuruya-san had served me a cup of expensive tea, and that she didn't ask me anything about the turtle. As I looked at both of my upperclassmen, I began thinking, what did 'When everything is over' mean? Was it when Asahina-san (small) was sent to the past, thus completing the cycle? It was, after all, a predetermined event for Asahina-san (Big). Does it mean that I get to see her when I finish cleaning up this mess?

'You and I' was a no brainer. The 'I' in question was without a doubt Asahina-san. During the Tanabata festival four years ago, I had met the same person twice, though they were different version of me.

My heart jumped as I thought about this. When could I reveal all of this to Asahina-san? The day I tell Asahina-san 'Actually, it was your future self who put those letters in my shoe locker', was it a predetermined event too?

Besides, just how much could I reveal to this current Asahina-san? From the orders I had received from the future, all I had been doing so far was make Asahina-san commit crimes together with me. Was this the right thing to do?

I shook my head lightly. It doesn't matter now, does it? Besides, I wasn't used to thinking. Is this an aftereffect of meeting that strange guy?

Nagato's words suddenly rang in my mind – There is no such thing as a win-win situation. There was no point worrying about the future. It is my duty and responsibility to shape my own future. Sometimes, I would curse my past self for making stupid mistakes, but I would never curse my future self. All I have done is do what I had to do, leaving everything for time to decide. That was the only thing I could do.

It was my future, after all.

After staying at Tsuruya-san's house for a little longer, I got on my bike and pedaled back home. Upon returning home, I found Shamisen sleeping peacefully on my bed. The only time he would look so peaceful was when he was sleeping. How I envy him. I don't think even a world plunged into chaos would prevent Shamisen from sleeping peacefully.

"Everything depends on tomorrow…"

Tomorrow we begin part two of Haruhi's exclusive two-day city wide search and commence the releasing of the turtle. I had done all necessary preparations, and there was nothing else I could do now. I had searched for buried treasure, dug holes, sent unknown people to the hospital, moved rocks, and even mailed memory chips —- Oh wait, that's something I haven't done yet. Best get it done before I forget again.

Using the envelope I had bought from the convenience store, I copied the address from letter #3, inserted the broken memory chip, sealed it tight, and attached some stamps. After that, I once again put on my jacket and headed out. Oh, and of course I didn't put my address on the back of the envelope.

After cycling all the way to the post office and depositing it into the mailbox, I silently prayed that nothing would happen to it while it was being mailed. I don't want to have another matter to worry about, Asahina-san (Big). Everything should have a smooth start, and a good end. Now that the end was near, I hope that nothing will happen from now onwards, up until I meet Asahina-san (Big) when everything is over at the bench of the Tanabata Festival.

Chapter 6

The fateful Sunday had finally arrived.

Like yesterday, I arrived by bike at the square in front of the station before nine; as usual, everyone was there already; as usual, we drew lots in the coffee shop nearby in which I footed the bill; and as expected, I was drawn together with Nagato. Nagato only needed to be told once, and she would never forget what needs to be done, and it's unlikely that she would make a mistake. I ought to learn from her in this aspect. I would have to especially keep my promises with Nagato no matter what. Since Nagato has always treated me well, after all.

As I inquired frequently for the time in the coffee shop, I noticed Haruhi was now even more giddy than yesterday, but I had no time to care about that. Ever since the treasure hunt, she's always been like that, I guess that lull at the beginning of the month was just her feeling unwell.

As Haruhi whispered in Asahina-san's ear, she revealed a meaningful smile. Now that was quite a surreal scene. I really wanted to know what Haruhi and Asahina-san were smiling so happily about, but as Koizumi and Nagato's expression remained the same as usual, I don't suppose anything out of the ordinary will happen.

As I emptied the remnants of my Viennese cappuccino, Haruhi slid the bill before my eyes and stood up.

The time is ten o'clock in the morning.

Even if I were to walk to that cheery blossom filled path, I would still have plenty of time.

As we were to meet at noon, taking into consideration the time it takes to release the turtle and the round trip back, there was still plenty of time to spare.

As I saw Haruhi, Asahina-san and Koizumi walk away, I said to Nagato,

"I'm sorry, but can you go to the library on your own today? I'll come pick you up in an hour,"

"I see."

Nagato placed her coat hood over her head and replied without even looking at me,

"Nagato, do you have any idea what Asahina-san and I are doing?"

"Something necessary."

Nagato murmured, and headed off towards the library. I hesitated for a while and went after her,

“Necessary for whom?”

“For you and Asahina Mikuru.”

And you’re not included? What about Haruhi and Koizumi?

“…”

Nagato continued to walk forward without saying anything, finally a plain voice came out from behind that hood of hers,

“Maybe we will become involved, though I am not sure yet.”

Perhaps sensing that I look dejected as I stand there, Nagato suddenly turned around, and looked at me with her glass-like eyes,

“However…”

Her hair fluttered in the wind,

“We should know very soon. When that happens I would take action. So would Koizumi Itsuki.”

Ever since I knew Nagato, her way of expression has always been to jump from point to point without linking them together.

“Our ways forward are the same. For me. And also for you.”

As though she’d reached a conclusion, Nagato suddenly turned back to walk silently away again. This time I didn’t follow.

“Thanks, Nagato,”

As it was kind of embarrassing, I said it very softly. I wasn’t sure whether the hooded figure that was slowly walking farther away heard me, but I’m sure she would understand my feelings. I do not believe that Nagato would not possess such empathy.

This also confirmed something for me. Though we may be different to various extents, I truly believe that I, along with Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san are trustees to each other. At the center was Haruhi shining as bright as a star, while we were the planets circling around her orbit. Nothing is ever predictable. If one day Mars and Venus were to suddenly disappear, I’m sure people would be feeling lonely, at least the astronomers would be troubled. Before confirming whether Martians or Venusians even exist, I certainly do not wish to find our neighbors just disappearing like that without even a warning. There were surprisingly many instances when you would go into a panic after finding out things that you take for granted had suddenly vanished. Take my automatic pencil while I was doing my exams for example… Forget it, you wouldn’t

want to waste your time hearing my stupid analogies. Anyway, I never want to go through that sense of loss I experienced last December.

As to which road I should take, it was all determined beforehand.

I arrived by the bank of the stream in thirty minutes. The scene of the cherry blossoms flourishing wildly in autumn was nowhere to be seen. Only the trees with their naked branches remained standing, awaiting for the arrival of spring. I walked along the path towards the long bench that overlooked the low-lying river. This was a typical stream where the sediment around causes the bank to be on a higher altitude. The water surface was nearly three meters below the bank. The structure of the bank was well constructed, giving people a neat impression. As there wasn't a lot of water in the stream, not to mention it was only a few centimeters deep, as well as being downstream, the flow of the stream was relatively calm. By summer, there'll be merry scenes of kids going down the stream chasing little fishes around. On the other hand, with this being a chilly winter day, no one would want to approach the freezing water.

The shore was normally not as empty as the stream, but the long bench where I sat listening to Asahina-san proclaiming that she is a time traveler was empty today. Though it was a Sunday, it was such a cold day on a morning before the warm sun was shining overhead, no one would come to take a walk by the bank. The cherry blossom path was nearly empty, save a dog walking idyllically followed by its master apparently freezing to death and walking silently.

As I was about to show off my acting skills and pretend to be a philosophical high school student listening quietly to the sound of the stream…

"Kyon-kun,"

Asahina-san walked up the river bank from the steps facing the road. Looks like she remembered to bring the plastic box carrying the turtle. I looked further away and found what seemed to be a luxurious limousine driving off quietly. That must be from Tsuruya-san's family. I must remind myself to thank the driver, as well.

It was 10:44 in the morning. By the time I reached the edge of the stream with Asahina-san, the watch had just turned to forty-five minutes, our timing was perfect.

"The water…looks very cold…"

Asahina-san gazed at the water flowing very slowly while bringing the box before her and looked at the turtle,

"I wonder if this turtle can grow up normally?"

Showing kindness even to a small animal, our senpai continued,

“Please wait a while,”

She placed the box on the ground and opened the lid. She then took out the box of pet food from her pocket. The little turtle stuck its neck out towards the roof which had suddenly disappeared and looked hesitant. When Asahina-san brought the box of pet food closer to it, it quickly swallowed the food in one gulp. After just one night, this turtle had already begun to get used to living with humans, Asahina-san’s kindness surely could reach no bounds.

Although Asahina-san was reluctant to part with the little turtle, I’m sorry to say that time’s up. There was only three minutes remaining till 10:50.

“Remember to come back in spring,” I said gently to the little turtle as I picked it up. The little turtle did not resist and laid quietly on my palm, not moving an inch.

“When we meet again, I’m sure he will have grown bigger.”

Though there was no proof of that, that’s all I could say. I avoided Asahina-san’s gaze, who was looking very worried for the little turtle, and made a posture about to toss it out. Just as I was about to make a knuckleball pitch…

“Excuse me,”

A voice suddenly called from behind. I nearly fell into the stream while holding the turtle. After stepping forward clumsily for a while, I finally found my footing and turned around.

“Thanks for saving me last time, Onii-san, Onee-san,”

A young voiced, bespectacled looking boy was bowing gratefully to us. It was the boy that I saved from the claws of death last month in a potential traffic accident. I call him the Bespectacled Boy. Besides, he lives very near Haruhi’s place, so Haruhi would occasionally become his stand-in governess.

“Ah…”

Asahina-san looked quite surprised, and so was I, since I never thought I would ever see him again.

“May I ask what you are doing here?”

The Bespectacled Boy asked with a curious-looking expression that was miles apart from that of my sister as he looked at me and Asahina-san, and then at the turtle in my hand. I was about to ask what you’re doing here.

“I’m on my way to cram school.”

I was about to ask when the boy had already answered on his own, pointing to the schoolbag he was carrying behind his back,

“I always walk through this way to cram school, it was the same that time as well,”

The boy bowed once again, and then with a puzzling look, gazed at the box on the ground and the shelled reptile crawling around on my hand,

“Is Onii-san going to release the turtle to the wild?”

“Yeah… sort of.”

After answering, I suddenly felt consumed by guilt once again. Both Asahina-san and this boy had eyes revealing their compassion for the little turtle, and asked quietly: “Why do you want to toss such a small turtle into the stream on such a cold winter’s day?” It’s not like I wanted to do this either, but the problem is that I have to do this.

The watch indicates that there was now less than one minute before the indicated time, I no longer had time to look confused, I quickly thought of an idea and said,

“Hey kid, are you allowed to keep pets at home? I mean, if you take this guy home, would your parents be mad at you?”

The boy pushed his glasses and said,

“I don’t think so, as long as I take care of him,”

“Really? Okay then, wait here,”

I picked up the turtle on its back and knelt down beside the stream. The shore we were on was three meters from the water surface, so it wasn’t that far. And as the stream was flowing slowly, I wasn’t worried that the turtle would be washed away.

I gently dropped the turtle just like letting go of a feather, trying to reduce the impact of its fall.

“Ah!” Asahina-san exclaimed.

Sploosh! The turtle fell into the water. Creating ripples of concentric circles, it slowly sank into the water and was now going downstream.

The boy stared at such a scene, he didn’t even dare breathe once.

After sinking for a while, the turtle kicked to the shallow surface and re-emerged out of the water. Apparently looking troubled at the ripples that it has caused, it drifted for a while before it began to paddle. It finally climbed up a rock nearby and stuck out its neck. It didn’t seem like it was

saying goodbye to us, more like thinking how it has expanded its horizons from a turtle's perspective.

Eventually, the ripples subsided and only the turtle remained standing on the rock.

I had no idea how accurate Asahina-san's (big) calculations were, but I have fulfilled her request of "throwing the turtle into the stream". What I do with the turtle afterwards was solely up to my discretion. I convinced myself while taking off my socks. Rolling up my trousers just to be safe, I began to wade into the water, leaving Asahina-san and the boy with their eyes widened. The water was really freezing cold, and the surface was filled with some slimy algae-like stuff which felt gross, but as I've always played in the stream with my cousins every time I visit them in the countryside, this was nothing.

"Sorry about that, little turtle."

The turtle lifted its tiny head. When I stuck out my hand, it didn't attempt to escape, and allowed me to grab it. Perhaps it wanted to say to me: "If you're going to pick me up, then don't toss me in the first place." It's a good thing I wasn't fluent in the turtle-language. As I returned to the shore with the turtle in my hand, and placed him back in the box, the coldness in my feet went straight to my brain. Man, I'm so gonna get diarrhea when I get back.

I sat on the ground and lifted my feet above to shake off the excess water and said,

"Kid, this turtle's yours now."

"Can I really have it?"

An observer to all this a few paragraphs ago, the Bespectacled Boy now asked hesitatingly,

"Doesn't Onii-san have a special reason to release this turtle into the wild?"

I knew this kid was asking due to his curiosity, but like the turtle itself, I don't have any answers that can satisfy that curiosity of yours. Since even I'm trying to find an explanation for the meaning of my own actions.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Even the turtle would feel troubled upon being released into the wild in the middle of winter. If you're willing to take him, I'm sure he'll be better off than having to soak himself in a freezing river."

Will that do, Asahina-san? Though you said that the instructions from the future has to be absolutely obeyed, my actions had not gone against the instructions at all. Despite that, I was still a bit worried, but I saw that Asahina-san, who has been kind to little animals, had already begun handing the box of pet food to the boy.

"This is the turtle's basic meals, take it as well,"

She then said like an elder sister,

“Promise me that you’ll take care of him.”

“I promise,”

The boy replied slowly, but not in a disrespectful way. He received the plastic box and box of pet food from Asahina-san, and held them tightly with his arms,

“I’ll take good care of him,”

He said passionately. Actually, you don’t have to be so determined about it.

“Oh yeah, kid. I want you to promise one more thing.”

There was a need to take a precaution. It was because we didn’t take this precaution the last time around, both Asahina-san and I got punished severely by Haruhi. That painful memory still lingers in my mind till now.

“There’s a girl called Suzumiya Haruhi that lives near your place, right?”

“Yes, Suzumiya-nee-san has always taken good care of me.”

For some reason, I shuddered at the name “Suzumiya-nee-san”.

“You must not tell Haruhi anything about what happened today. My presence here with Asahina-san… that is the Bunny Girl nee-san, and us giving you this turtle are strictly confidential. Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes.”

The boy nodded very solemnly. I guess I can rest easy now. Asahina-san now asked as well,

“Are you sure you’re all right with taking this turtle back with you? Wouldn’t… your mother or family say anything about not accepting things from strangers?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find an excuse.”

The boy straightened his back and said,

“I’ll tell them that as the people doing experiments on this turtle didn’t need it anymore, they were about to throw it away when I happened to pass by. As I felt pity for him, I asked them to give it to me… I’m sure Dad and Mom would let me have him,”

This kid sure was reliable. I really wish he would teach my sister a thing or two. They were both about the same age, but the difference was so great. This must have to do with the environments that they grew up in.

“Then, I have to go now, my cram school’s about to start,”

The polite boy bowed courteously to us once again. Asahina-san patted his head and said,

“Don’t forget the promise you made last time. Be careful when crossing the roads. Don’t let any accidents happen to you, and study hard. That way, you’ll become a very useful person. And a very important person, as well…”

Looking at Asahina-san sticking out her pinky, the boy revealed a shyness that suited his age, and hooked his pinky onto hers with trepidation. I couldn’t help but smile at seeing the figures of Asahina-san and this boy, one big and one small, standing together.

The boy then let go, embarrassed, and walked off carrying the plastic box as though it were some valuable treasure. Several times he turned around to bow to us. Asahina-san never stopped waving, until he had completely disappeared from our view, and only when I had finally put my socks on over my dried feet and put on my shoes, did she put down her hands.

“Phew…”

Asahina-san sighed deeply. For her, or I should say for the future version of Asahina-san, this boy seemed like a very important figure. If I were to travel back to the Edo Period and came face to face with a historical figure, I would probably feel the same way. I didn’t even need to ask, that’s got to be Classified Information.

“Phew,”

I too breathed a deep sigh. Rather than a depressed sigh, it was more like a sigh of relief that it was all over. My mission with this Asahina-san has now come to a close. The empty can prank, the gourd-shaped rock, the mysterious memory device, and the turtle.

The question was, what do we do next? I haven’t got a clue at all. The final letter #6 made absolutely no mention of anything. As long as Asahina-san doesn’t go out on her own and continue to live in Tsuruya-san’s bungalow, then I shouldn’t need to worry. As the next two days were free, this Asahina-san would eventually return to our original time period. In contrast, I would need to instruct the present Asahina-san to travel back to the past, but that’s the day after tomorrow. For now, I felt a weight was lifted off my shoulders.

“Asahina-san, though you’ve only just arrived, I think you should go take some rest at Tsuruya-san’s place. We’ll take a taxi and send you back, I’ll then go back to the library to pick up Nagato.”

“Okay…”

Asahina-san said absentmindedly and walked off. Under my guidance, we reached the road that runs parallel to the cherry blossom path. Standing by the pavement waiting for a taxi, Asahina-san didn't speak a lot, and seemed rather depressed.

While waiting for the taxi, I was also paying attention to my surroundings, for fear that the Sneering Bastard from yesterday would cause trouble again. It was obvious that bastard didn't come with good intentions, but as he made it too obvious, he certainly didn't feel like a scary enemy. To be frank, he hardly made me shiver at all. If it was Koizumi who approached us using that bastard's manner of speech, I would have felt extremely threatened. If he hadn't picked the wrong time to make his appearance, then he was probably playing the wrong sort of character.

Aha! I find myself to be more and more reliable now. That's to be expected, for the past year, I've been involved in all sorts of strange occurrences, allowing my vision to expand and my mind to be more open. My life has been put in peril occasionally, but it's different now. Though I wasn't as determined as Nagato, I too went through the experience of having to decide what I really wanted. I'll never misjudge my role and position again.

Though there were hardly any taxis and few cars on the road, it was quite a pleasure in itself to be standing all alone together with Asahina-san, so I didn't feel anxious with the wait at all. But as I'd already told Nagato to go to the library herself, I would be doing her an injustice if I didn't go pick her up as soon as things were settled.

…It was pointless worrying. Maybe I shouldn't even be distracted.

Because in the next moment, I witnessed an unbelievable scene.

At that time, I didn't check the time on my watch. I never had the time to anyway, so I didn't know the exact time when it happened, I just knew that it was sometime before eleven.

Here was what happened:

As I waited with Asahina-san on the pavement on the left side of the county road, trying to see if there were any taxis coming our way, a big car came driving slowly. As it wasn't some highway, there was nothing wrong with it driving so slowly. Truth be told, at that moment I paid no attention to it.

Yet that approaching car decelerated even more and, without even making a signal, stopped right in front of us.

"Huh?" I suddenly felt suspicious, I don't think I've felt this suspicious before.

This was because the door to that minivan opened suddenly, and a hand from within had dragged Asahina-san into the car within a few seconds.

“WAH…!?”

By the time I realized Asahina-san had screamed, the green minivan had drove off in full speed without even closing its door. The plume of smoke it emitted felt as though it was mocking my slow reaction. By the time I looked properly, the car had already driven off to the other end of the road, and it became a small dot in the distance.

“What the…”

It only took me about 0.2 seconds to recover my senses. The car had already disappeared from my vision.

Hold it, hold it, HOLD IT!

What the hell just happened? Asahina-san had vanished before my eyes. She was dragged into the car, and that car had sped off and was now out of sight, leaving me standing on the roadside all alone… Just what was this?

“Kidnapped…!?”

And right under my nose as well. I could’ve stopped it if I had reached my arm out, even if it meant I had to grab her body. Asahina-san, who was standing so close to me just a few seconds ago, was no longer here. Can something this ridiculous actually happen!?

“Damn it!! I don’t believe this!!”

I don’t think I’ve been this terrified since finding out Haruhi had disappeared from the classroom last December. The last time I was this shocked was when I discovered that Asakura had replaced Haruhi sitting behind me.

“Shit!”

Was it that Sneering Bastard!? Was he behind all this!? If it really was, then I had underestimated him. Could it be that his terrible timing in appearance and choice of character was all just a ruse to distract me? If that was really just a trap to divert my attention by thinking he posed no threat at all…

“ASAHINA-SAN!!!”

A loud sound vibrated my eardrums. It wasn’t the sound of the wind blowing through the cherry blossom trees, but the sound coming out of my now completely pale face.

I took out my cell-phone, I could only rely on help from others now. Anyone would do, as long as I can bring Asahina-san back, it didn’t matter whether it was the police, fire fighters, the Self-Defense Forces or even the Chamber of Commerce. My fingers began to push the numbers

on their own, not even knowing who I was dialing. I only knew that I heard a dial tone on the other end and someone answering it,

“What now, Kyon?”

It was Haruhi’s voice. As it all happened too suddenly, not to mention I wasn’t completely back to my senses, I ended up calling Haruhi. By this time my brain was already not functioning properly,

“Haruhi we’ve got a problem! Asahina-san’s been kidnapped!”

I called for reinforcements without even thinking…

“Wha? What are you talking about?”

Haruhi’s voice sounded very casual. Feeling anxious, I yelled once again,

“I said Asahina-san’s been kidnapped! If we don’t hurry and rescue her…”

“Hey, Kyon,”

Haruhi spoke in a nearly elegant voice,

“I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, but before you decide to make a prank call, you ought to sort out your script and try not to be too ridiculous. What’s wrong with your brain? Saying stuff like this. Mikuru-chan’s standing right next to me. If you had said it was Yuki, then I might have believed you.”

“No! It’s not Nagato! It’s Asahina-san…”

By this time I suddenly realized, it was useless no matter how I explained it to Haruhi. That’s right, right now in this time period, Asahina-san was with Haruhi. Only that it was the original Asahina-san from this time period, and not the Asahina-san that appeared in the broom closet. Speaking of that Asahina-san, the one that just got abducted by the car…

“You fail for making such a lame prank that gets exposed so easily. Besides, pranks are supposed to be funny. I don’t have time for this, you idiot Kyon!”

“No! Wait…”

The phone was cut off.

My hand trembled as I held the cell-phone. I shouldn’t have called Haruhi in such a situation where every second counts. I didn’t even need her to tell me that I was an idiot. Even when asking for reinforcements, I shouldn’t have asked Haruhi for them…

The phone began ringing.

Without even finding out who it was, I answered it.

“Hello?”

It was Koizumi’s voice. Before I could speak…

“Don’t worry. Suzumiya-san and Asahina-san aren’t with me right now. Well, I told them I needed to go to the bathroom and excused myself,”

Who cares about that!? That’s not the issue here, what’s important is…

“Koizumi! Asahina-san has…”

“I understand the situation. Leave it to me, they should be coming to you soon,”

“Who’s coming to me soon?”

Feeling very baffled, I lifted my head. As if on cue, a taxi had stopped right in front of me. It was a black taxi. I wasn’t sure which cab company it was from, but it seemed familiar. I remember riding on such a taxi when Koizumi conned me to visit some “Avatars”.

The back door of the taxi opened.

“Get in, hurry!”

The passenger in the back seat waved to me, and I quickly leapt into the car. Sitting in the familiar car was a familiar figure. Before I could digest the situation, the door had already closed and I was instantly thrust back to my seat by the sudden force caused by the car moving off.

“We’ll now begin the pursuit,”

A clear crisp voice said by my side, it sounded familiar. As I’ve met her during the summer and winter, I couldn’t have so easily forgotten her name.

“M, Mori Sonou-san?”

“It’s been a while.”

It’s actually only been a month since we last met, so it wasn’t exactly a while. But, what was Mori-san doing here? And she wasn’t dressed in the familiar maid uniform, but in an office lady attire that could be found everywhere.

Mori-san revealed her usual smile and said,

“Didn’t Koizumi explain to you before? I too am a member of the ‘Organization’. The maid was just one of my disguises, and that was only limited to the time I spent with you.”

As though trying to assure me, Mori-san turned her gaze towards the driver’s seat and nodded,

“And it’s not just me. He is the same as well,”

Lifting up the left hand which was on the steering wheel, the driver exchanged glances with me through the rear-view mirror.

“Arakawa-san…”

“Greetings.”

He was a butler who could cook brilliantly before, but now he was a taxi driver driving at top speed. The elderly gentleman now said,

“There is a limit to being aggressive. They’ve gone too far by kidnapping that adorable lady. We won’t let them get away with this.”

As he stepped on the gas pedal once again, I was thrust even further into my seat. A fear began to creep on me as I realized I was riding in a car that was driving at a terrifying speed, yet at the same time, my stiff brain was beginning to become flexible once again.

Mori-san and Arakawa-san. I knew they were both Koizumi’s accomplices, I also knew the maid and butler appearance was just their part-time job. Yet I never thought I would meet them again in this situation, it’s as though they had expected Asahina-san to be kidnapped and sent a car to support me… Aha, that’s it,

“Now it all makes sense,”

I finally managed to speak,

“So you guys and Koizumi knew Asahina-san would get kidnapped, and so have been closely watching us while standing by in case it happens, right?”

“On the contrary,”

Mori-san said while giving a female version of Koizumi’s smile,

“Our initial target was them, not you. When we saw their car approaching you, we knew things were getting bad. We did not expect them to take such an action.”

“Who do you mean by ‘they’?”

The image of the Sneering Bastard from yesterday appeared in my head.

“Didn’t Koizumi tell you this as well? The people that have kidnapped Asahina-san are from a group that’s hostile to our ‘Organization’.”

If that’s the case, then it didn’t matter whether they were time travelers or espers, their actions were equally unforgivable.

“Why would they want to kidnap Asahina-san?”

“Maybe they were getting desperately anxious. They probably resorted to such means in order to secure their privileged position in the future.”

Privileged position?

“Yes. I think they plan to use her as a bargaining chip with the future authorities. The problem for them is that they’ve got the wrong person. They should really be kidnapping the Asahina Mikuru-san that is with Koizumi right now,”

Mori-san described something unbelievable as though it were a daily occurrence.

“It doesn’t seemed like they had planned this action properly, and this was only decided hastily. We would need to investigate why they would suddenly decide to take action now.”

The appearance of that Sneering Bastard was also quite sudden. A new group of time travelers, could that be caused by that bastard’s appearance?

As though able to read my mind, Mori-san nodded and said,

“The fact that they’ve joined forces this time means they’re serious. We cannot simply do nothing about it.”

“Excuse me, is the ‘Organization’…”

I stopped short of saying “my ally”.

“Standing on our side?”

“We simply wish to maintain the status quo, is that not enough?”

As there was nothing to bargain about in the first place, I didn’t know whether that was too little or too much. Those bastards, the people that had kidnapped Asahina-san, just what were they thinking? Or rather, who on earth were they? If they weren’t on our side, were they our enemy? And if so, what kind of enemy?

“They consist of a rival group hostile to the ‘Organization’, a band of time travelers opposing Asahina Mikuru-san’s faction, and an extra-terrestrial cosmic entity different from the one that created Nagato Yuki-san,”

Mori-san explained clearly to me,

“We had a feeling that they would join forces sooner or later, after hearing Koizumi’s report about the incident in the snow mountain. Those three forces are probably forming an alliance, no, we believe they have already formed an alliance. Suzumiya Haruhi-san was a gamble worth taking for them, it’s either win-all or lose-all,”

The whole car shook as though leaping upwards. Upon reaching a cross-junction, the black taxi charged through the traffic lights without stopping, and didn’t even slow down when going through an S-curve, continuing to move ahead at top speed.

“Then, Koizumi and you guys…”

Already feeling dizzy, I said,

“Already knew that there was another Asahina-san? And you also knew that this Asahina-san from a week later would stay in Tsuruya-san’s place?”

“If it weren’t for her, the other Asahina Mikuru-san would have been kidnapped instead, and it would have been right in front of Suzumiya Haruhi-san’s eyes.”

Things would really be bad if that were to happen. No one could know just what action Haruhi would take.

“In that case…”

The Asahina-san from the future was acting as a decoy for the present Asahina-san. In other words, in order to protect her past self from getting kidnapped, she would have to allow her future self to be kidnapped instead, right? So that’s how it is. It was necessary for Asahina (Michiru)-san to travel back to the past after all. To be honest, I could have handled all those instructions from Asahina-san (big) all on my own without any problem, but now I understood why she wanted me to bring Asahina-san along, or there would be no meaning to it. The other time traveler. The turtle and the boy. And the kidnapping. Only Asahina-san (big) would know the full story.

As I was busy going into deep thought…

“Don’t let them out of your sight, Arakawa,”

“I know.”

Their voices now directed my attention to the front of the car, I could now see the teal minivan ahead of us. Both vehicles were now cruising at insane speeds. Ever since the pursuit began, it wouldn’t have been surprising if there were three to four accidents on the way. Judging from his drifting techniques while disregarding the traffic signals, Arakawa-san’s driving skills were well beyond that of a normal butler, but more like that of a WRC driver.

The kidnappers' car now headed towards the mountains and very soon went past the forest park, where we had our outdoor shooting for our movie back in autumn, and went even further north. There was nothing but mountainous roads there. Damn! Just what do they plan to do with Asahina-san in such a god forsaken place? Unforgivable!

My gaze remains fixed on the rear of that teal minivan. It was the same car as the one last time. The exact same model as the one that nearly ran down the Bespectacled Boy last month. There's no mistake about it. The guys on that car were from a different world from ours.

Driving at an insane speed, the kidnappers' car now left the tarmac road and entered a really mountainous road. Arakawa switched gears elegantly and followed them closely behind. The roads were basically carved out from the edge of a cliff, and the curves were just wide enough to accommodate two cars drifting past it, they weren't even equipped with safety rails. If either driver lost concentration for even a moment, they would plunge with the car straight into the depths of the ravine.

As though trying to distract our attention, a cell phone rang, but it wasn't my cell phone. Mori-san took out her cell phone and answered,

"Understood. Everything will go according to plan,"

She gave a simple reply and then hung up, and then said to the front seat with an elegant and clear voice,

"Arakawa, we're almost there,"

"No problem,"

Arakawa nodded and said with a very reliable voice, and switched to a low gear, disengaging the engine. Before I could even ask what he was doing,

"WHOA!"

The car came to a rocky unpainted round curve, just before the road turns into a corner. From that corner where we were headed, a police car rushed out, and did a beautiful drift before stopping horizontally across the road, blocking all access forward.

Without anywhere to go, the minivan was forced to brake, creating a cloud of dust as it decelerated rapidly. When one of its wheels stuck over the cliff for a moment, my heart nearly stopped, but the kidnappers were just as skilled at driving. Forcibly shifting its position, as though performing a car stunt, the minivan spun for one and a half turns, creating an annoying screeching sound. It nearly bumped the side of the police car when it finally came to a halt in a parallel position.

Arakawa-san also did the same and stopped the car in a parallel position, albeit slowly and safely. Surrounded from both sides, the only route the minivan could go was straight down the cliff.

“Arakawa, stay here and standby,”

Upon saying that, Mori-san opened the door and stepped out of the road. I followed her and got out as well, as I was about to rush to the minivan, Mori-san grabbed me by the shoulder.

Mori-san stopped me with a look in her eyes, then said to the kidnappers’ car in a clear voice,

“Please turn off your engine and step out of the car. There’s still time for you to comply.”

She still said in a solemn tone, yet it sounded different from the one I heard in the lone island mansion or in Tsuruya-san’s snow mountain mansion.

A police officer stepped out of the police car, and I was stunned to see the person wearing that tidy police uniform. Under that police hat raising his thumb towards me was the face of Yutaka-san, the younger sibling of the Tamaru brothers. Sitting on the driver’s seat was his older brother, Tamaru Keiichi-san, who gave me a polite salute with his friendly face.

So were they the ones who Mori-san had spoken on the phone?

“Release Asahina Mikuru-san at once. Your plan has failed. There is no need to make things any more complicated than they already are.”

Mori-san’s authoritative voice had shifted my attention back to the minivan. As the windows were coated with a dark film, the interior could not be seen. Just as I was about to lose my temper and rush towards the minivan, even if it means giving it a kick, the engine had already gone silent and the slide door had also begun to move. Does this mean they no longer intend to resist?

But, when I saw the kidnappers reveal themselves, my eyes were widened with astonishment. The kidnappers, who remained silent, were not some tough-faced macho-men, but a group of young men and women you’d find anywhere in the street. Even if I were to remember each of their faces, the biggest impression they made would be that they didn’t look sinister at all.

However, those doubts were soon cast off into the distance when I saw Asahina-san looking exhausted inside the car. Carried by the last woman to come off the car, Asahina-san seems to have lost consciousness as her eyes have closed, looking completely like a clay statue.

Absolutely unforgivable!

I was once again stopped by Mori-san for trying to rush over again.

“I’m sure you all understand now, but allow me to repeat this again: If you even lay a finger on her…”

My legs softened at the sight of her sinister-looking smile. Who would have thought that such a beautiful lady would have such a terrifying smile? This makes the smiles Haruhi makes whenever she has something in mind pale in comparison.

Perhaps sensing I was nearly petrified, Mori-san turned towards me with her maid-like smile once again, and then turned back to those bastard kidnappers,

"Release her and I will let you go. It doesn't matter whether you return to your own organization or wherever. Otherwise…"

Mori-san's smile was now more terrifying than before, I think I'm about to faint. If I were one of those kidnappers, I'd probably shrink into a pea upon seeing such a smile.

Yet those kidnappers weren't intimidated at all, but simply snorted and released Asahina-san. The Sleeping Beauty Asahina-san now leaned against the wheel and sat on the ground. These kidnappers merely saved their asses by treating her as though she were a fragile object. If they even dare try to toss such a beauty, I'm seriously gonna yell like mad and give those bastards a taste of my fury.

"I will have the towing company return the car to you later. Please walk down the mountain from here."

Mori-san pointed solemnly towards the cliff. Though she asked them to "walk down the mountain", but the problem was that they had no climbing equipment. She was basically giving them hell, but for some reason, I felt extremely satisfied.

"Looks like we have no choice,"

One of the kidnappers said, as though oblivious to her current situation,

"We kind of expected it, but we still failed. I guess this was all predetermined,"

Dressed in red and still sitting inside the car, the one that spoke was the woman who carried Asahina-san out of the car. No matter how I look at her, she is relatively young, about the same age as myself.

As though trying to flirt with me, that lady gave a smile like a flower blossoming,

"Nice to meet you. I never thought we would meet under such circumstances, despite this, I'm still deeply honored. I had originally planned to find a suitable occasion to pay you a visit."

The lady made some gestures with her body language. Besides herself, the others had already stepped out of the car. The university-student like guy that came out last gave a stern face while shutting the door, and then headed for the nearly steep slope. After seeing one after another disappearing into the forest in the winter, it seems Mori-san and Tamaru Yutaka-san had no intention of bringing them to justice.

I desperately wanted to run over to Asahina-san's side, but Mori-san's hand still remained on my shoulder. The kidnapper lady now giggled,

"Don't you worry. Your precious time-traveler hasn't been harmed at all. We merely let her smell some anesthetics and put her to sleep. Who knows, she probably wouldn't remember what had happened. To be honest, we were quite surprised that she would fall asleep so quickly. Is she used to getting knocked out like that?"

Despite the departure of her comrades, that lady - or I should say, young girl - still remained nonchalant. Mori-san, just how long do you intend to let her continue with her cockiness? She's a kidnapper, an unforgivable kidnapper! By the way, if you Tamaru brothers are going to be dressed like that, I'm sure your costumes come with handcuffs, right?

As I was about to protest, one of the doors to the minivan that should have been empty had now opened.

"This is no fun,"

The guy sticking his head out suddenly revealed a smile five times more evil than if Koizumi were to smile evilly,

"I can't believe we got cornered so easily. If you want your Sleeping Beauty back, you can have her. We were supposed to last for a little longer, but now things have become worse for us."

He remained seated casually on his seat. It was the bastard from yesterday, the second time traveler with his own agenda. The Sneering Bastard continued,

"This is a predetermined event, too. For us as well, that is. So you can't blame us."

"You must leave as well, please,"

Mori-san said like an elegant big sister, her lips revealing a smile as deadly as a poison ivy,

"Or do you wish to remain here longer? We will gladly prepare a sleeping bag for you."

"Don't even bother,"

The Sneering Bastard gazed at Asahina-san, snorted loudly, and then stared at me with an evil eye.

"Our mission this time did not end in failure. We merely allowed history to follow its course. Great job guys, whether it's you or Asahina Mikuru. Oh yeah, let me ask you, how does it feel to have your limbs manipulated like a puppet? I definitely won't be pleased, as I hate following arranged scripts, especially ones where you already know the ending!"

"Well, I wouldn't mind if that were to happen to me,"

The kidnapper girl said.

“You tell me, how many futures have been decided? It requires a bit of skill to follow through to the correct outcome without deviating from the intended path, you know. While anyone can dance easily, it’s very difficult having to dance correctly as instructed.”

“Hmph! You can dance all you like! I never expected anything from you people,”

“Oh really?”

The kidnapper girl said amusingly,

“I personally wouldn’t mind at all. Since our objectives are the same, let’s continue to work together!”

His handsome face distorted by hatred, the Sneering Bastard began staring at me once again. Let me put this straight, as a regular receiver of Haruhi’s intense glare, your staring is nothing compared to hers. If you want to play a staring game with me, you’re all the more welcome to do so.

Perhaps sensing my hostile aura, the bastard muttered,

“Fools! Every one of you! I just can’t understand. You’re all so tragically ignorant!”

The bastard held the car door handle and threw this parting shot to me,

“I’ll be back. We’ll run into each other many times, you fool! But that’s my job.”

It seems like that’s all he wanted to say, as he slammed the door shut after saying that.

No one present made any movement. Mori-san maintained her terrifying smile, and just stared at the kidnapper girl. While I couldn’t move thanks to Mori-san holding me back. The nameless kidnapper girl remained standing with a smile, then as though thinking of something, she approached the car and opened the door.

Even if she didn’t do that, I already knew the car was now empty. There was no one inside, and the bastard who basically had a sign saying “I hate you” on his face had vanished without a trace. I couldn’t care less whether he traveled through time or space, to see such an eyesore of a freak disappear in front of my eyes was a thing worth celebrating.

“I should take my leave as well,”

Clapping her hands as though accomplishing her mission, the kidnapper girl looked at the mountainous path below her,

“I guess I’ll walk back. Oh, you can do whatever you want with that car. You can keep it, it’s yours,”

“Thanks,”

After replying, Mori-san finally let go of my hand. Like a mother bird worried about its offspring left in their nest, I hurried towards Asahina-san,

“Asahina-san!”

I carried her by her shoulder, her faint breathing and slight chest movements was proof that she was still alive. I was about to turn around to swear indignantly at that kidnapper girl, but she had already climbed down the cliff.

Mori-san came to my side and approached Asahina-san’s sleeping face. She placed her fingers onto Asahina-san’s neck and smelled the side of her lips,

“She’s fine. She should be awake in another two hours. Please carry her to the car,”

I was of course in charge of the carrying work. I was already used to carrying Asahina-san. This was also one of my jobs for which I do not wish to be replaced.

Once we got back to the black taxi, Arakawa-san looked gently at Asahina-san like a grandfather would look at his granddaughter, and then he looked with concern at me as well. I allowed the exhausted Asahina-san to sit in the back seat, and I naturally sat beside her. Though I panicked at first, all I want to do was yell “Banzai” now that I’ve saved Asahina-san. If those guys had succeeded… no, there’s no need to think about that anymore, that was now impossible.

Can I believe in predetermined events, Asahina-san (big)? For you to go to such lengths, it means this event is absolutely necessary for this Asahina-san to go through in order to become you when she grows up, right?

As my attention was now focused on the sleeping face of Asahina-san, who seemed younger than me, I didn’t notice Mori-san had also climbed onto the car, and had completely forgotten to say hi to the Tamaru brothers as the car drove off. It was only after a while that I came to my senses.

“Where do you wish to go from here?”

Mori-san asked. I now realized the taxi was heading back through the original route along the highway.

“…Please take me to the library,”

I wanted to see Nagato as soon as possible before I could relax. After giving my destination, I slumped onto my seat. My exhaustion level was comparable to that of Asahina-san’s.

I had thought that my work was over after releasing the turtle and picking it back up, I never expected to go through seeing Asahina-san getting kidnapped. Though I was mentally exhausted, I still managed to slowly move my lips,

"Mori-san… has Asahina-san been attacked by those people before? Have they nearly kidnapped her before without me knowing? And would they ever…"

"She has not been kidnapped in this time period."

Huh? Then what just…

"This shows that my deduction was correct. She is indeed unharmed in this time period. This is because her future self has acted as her decoy."

Mori-san's face was now full of compassion,

"Asahina-san is being watched over by many people. By you, by Nagato Yuki-san, and by us… like you, we do not wish to hand her over to anyone."

Just like how I trusted Koizumi, I guess she was also someone I could trust.

"As for other details, you can ask your gorgeous maid. I mean the one from the even further future, the beautiful and mature big sister, that is."

That was the most objective suggestion I've heard so far. I was about to see her even if you didn't tell me to. I sighed and asked something I suddenly thought of,

"Mori-san, are you one of Koizumi's superiors? You don't seem to refer to him in a deferential way."

Mori-san chortled and gave a smile which didn't reveal her age,

"That doesn't mean anything. It is usual for colleagues from the same company to address each other on friendly terms outside. It's the same for us."

It's pretty obvious she was dodging the question, but I was hardly interested in the rank and hierarchy of the "Organization". If I really want to know, I'd just interrogate Koizumi. Though like Mori-san, it's likely he won't reveal anything. According to Koizumi's style, if he really wants to tell me, he'll do so even with no one prompting him. This may be the 'Organization's' way of revealing information. Sooner or later, even if I didn't ask, Koizumi would eventually explain everything to me and chatter away.

Until then, I'll just quietly wait for that moment to come.

I got out of the taxi outside the library, and with help from Mori-san I once again carried the Sleeping Beauty that is Asahina-san.

“Please take care. I hope we meet again someday,”

Mori-san said once again with her gentle and friendly maid-like smile. Arakawa-san also gave his silent butler salute. They then headed north along the highway in their taxi. Who knows, when Koizumi brought me to visit those ‘Avatars’, it could have been Arakawa that was in the driver’s seat. I guess I’ll ask him next time. Even if it wasn’t, I’ll still have to thank him nonetheless, and the Tamaru brothers as well, for that matter.

As I carried Asahina-san to the entrance of the library, I noticed Nagato was there waiting for me. Nagato stood quite straight, as though she didn’t feel cold at all. Before I could speak…

“It is good that she is fine.”

Her eyes turned towards the sleeping face of Asahina-san lying on my shoulder,

“I have heard about what happened.”

From whom? Koizumi?

Nagato slowly shook her head, and stretched out one of her hands at an even slower speed.

In Nagato’s hand was a letter. Next to the illustration was printed a number:

#5.

Turns out the missing letter from the future was sent to Nagato instead. I didn’t even need to ask who the sender was. Still, Nagato told me anyway,

“It was from Asahina Mikuru’s differential temporal clone. We met about an hour ago.”

So you were here, Asahina-san (big). Only you went to see Nagato instead.

“Did she say anything?”

“She asked me to do her a favor.”

Nagato said calmly and stretched out her finger, placing it on Asahina-san’s smooth forehead.

“…Umm…huh…Wah!?”

It was a magical finger, as Asahina-san opened her eyes just by the touch of it,

“Wah! Kyon-kun… Huh? Why am I being carried by you? And, N-Nagato-san…”

I guess Shamisen would feel just as uncomfortable as Asahina-san right now whenever he’s being picked up against his own will. While she had been struggling since the moment she woke up, I had actually wanted to carry her a little longer, but since Nagato’s watching, I’ll just have to put her down. The anesthetic that Mori-san said would take two hours to wear off has seemingly been dispelled by a single touch from Nagato, as Asahina-san didn’t seem to wobble as her feet touched the ground once again.

Her eyes looking a bit red, Asahina-san looked teary-eyed at me,

“Um… has something happened to me? After giving that little turtle to that boy… Ah, that’s it, a car suddenly stopped in front…”

And after that, you were knocked unconscious. I told everything to Asahina-san, who doesn’t remember anything, as it had happened. Upon hearing me describe the details, Asahina-san’s face went from pale to red to pale again. It was only when I concluded with the end of the condensed version of the car pursuit, that she surprisingly revealed a smile,

“So that’s how it is. Turns out I’m useful after all, I protected my past self in this time period. Thank goodness.”

Asahina-san’s optimistic smile had blown away all the fatigue within me. She was right, if it wasn’t for this Asahina (Michiru)-san, the kidnappers may have resorted to extreme means to kidnap Asahina-san (small). And they would have done it right in front of Haruhi. Even if Koizumi had wanted to stop them, there’s nothing much he could do if he were to keep his cover intact. Things would become serious indeed if that were to happen. Haruhi would be royally pissed and Koizumi’s faction would certainly not sit by and do nothing. Yet, those kidnappers should have realized by now, even kidnapping the harmless Asahina (Michiru)-san didn’t go as well as they might have expected.

This time, I didn’t rely on Nagato’s powers to rescue Asahina-san. If Nagato had been involved this time, I wonder what might have happened? Those people should know the consequences very well if that happens. There’s no way four mere kidnappers could beat the formidable Nagato, but I’d certainly look forward to such a scene.

“Oh, that letter…”

Asahina-san’s eyes were now fixed on Letter #5.

“When was it sent over here?”

Just a while ago, but it was sent to Nagato.

“Sent to Nagato-san…”

Raising her eyebrows, Asahina-san said softly to her fellow brigade member's slim figure,

"N, Nagato-san. Could the one who sent you that letter be… Ah?"

"I can't tell you."

Nagato flatly turned down her question. The poker-faced alien said in a tone like a teacher teaching her students,

"Sooner or later you will understand."

She then said to Asahina-san, whose cherry-like lips were opened as she stood stiffly there,

"As you of all people should know best."

Like a snowman that had just spoken, Nagato turned around and put on her hood once she finished.

From her eyes, I knew that she did not mean, "I don't want to tell you." Turns out I wasn't the only one who feels that "You'll understand even if I didn't".

Sandwiched between two silent female brigade members, I suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable, so I decided to open that letter.

The contents of Letter #5 were as below:

"Everything is now over. Please tell the Asahina Mikuru there to return to her original garrisoned time period. You're free to decide what the destination time and location would be."

Free to decide… huh? How I hoped this line could be interpreted differently under different circumstances, just once would do. Of course it would be better if Asahina-san were to say this directly to me.

Forget it, I can think all I want, it just couldn't be possible. Even if that wish were granted, I probably wouldn't dare do anything, and would be so overwhelmed that I'd simply faint. By the time I'd come to my senses I would have realized Haruhi had awoken me by knocking on my head, damn it! That is why I never allow myself to have wishes that are too ridiculous, especially not like Haruhi who would wish for the rotation of the Earth to go backwards. Wishes that you don't want to become true are better off staying ungranted, and the world should stay as it is.

And so, my priority was now to send Asahina-san to her original time period. I placed my hand on the shoulder of Asahina-san, who seemed to be lost in thought, and showed her the details of Letter #5. Though she was more concerned about who the sender was, she still went and read the letter from beginning to end. She gave an expression of understanding something and said,

"Understood. My mission has now ended."

She then said with a lonely expression,

“But now it would become an indirect order. Without your instruction, I can’t return to my original time period,”

Yet Asahina-san quickly dispelled that thought and was smiling at me once again,

“I will show you one day that I can accomplish something all on my own as well. By then I will be the one saving Kyon-kun. Though I don’t know when that’ll be, it’ll definitely come…”

Your wish will come true. As long as you don’t forget the meaning to achieving that goal, and never lose your determination towards achieving that goal.

I looked at my watch, but I didn’t feel like watching the time,

“Let’s see, what’s the destination time…”

This Asahina-san appeared in the broom locker at 3:45 PM six days before today. She said she arrived at “4:15 PM, eight days from now”, so her destination ought to take place after 4:15 PM that day. If it were set before that time, then it’ll create lots of confusion. As long as I avoid having two Asahina-sans appearing at the same time, I guess it’ll be okay to set the time difference between departure and arrival by 62 seconds.

“It’ll be Tuesday two days from now, right? How about 4:16PM at that day? In that way, you would only be absent from that time period for about a minute or so. Let’s pick the same location as well, inside the broom locker in the club room,”

“You’re right… if it’s that time, only Kyon-kun would be there,”

“Uniform and indoor shoes.”

Thanks to Nagato reminding us, I remembered that the clothes this Asahina-san was wearing were all borrowed from Tsuruya-san. Her sailor uniform had been left at Tsuruya-san’s place. I also realized that if I escorted Asahina-san back to Tsuruya-san’s place, I would miss the scheduled meeting time. Yet I barely managed to rescue Asahina-san, I really didn’t want to leave her all alone again.

“In that case, Asahina-san, you should just go straight to two days later like that. I’ll try to find a way to get your uniform and indoor shoes back from Tsuruya-san today.”

“Then I leave it all to you. Oh, and…”

After bowing deeply, Asahina-san looked straight at me, as though forgetting what to say, she opened her little mouth then shut it again. Was it because Nagato was around that she didn’t dare speak?

“It’s nothing… Um, I think I’ll tell you when I get back,”

Though I was concerned, it didn’t seem like anything important. If I’ll know about it the day after tomorrow, then I didn’t mind not knowing about it now.

How I wished the time traveling device would be activated now, but Asahina-san probably wouldn’t let me have a glimpse of that. Seems like she would need to be alone in order for her to travel, so we entered the library and escorted Asahina-san to the ladies’ bathroom.

“Kyon-kun, I’m really thankful for your help these last few days. That includes Koizumi-kun and Tsuruya-san as well.”

You can thank Koizumi anytime, for Mori-san you can do so when you see her next time. As for Tsuruya-san, I’m sure she’ll understand even if you didn’t say anything. Of course, I’ll relay it to Tsuruya-san as well anyway.

“Well then… Kyon-kun, Nagato-san, see you later,”

Asahina-san still looked hesitant to enter the bathroom when she went in. Once the bathroom door had closed, no more sound could be heard from inside. Nagato then lifted her head and quietly said to me,

“She has disappeared from this time period.”

It’s over, is it? The rest will have to wait till two days later. I accompanied Nagato out of the library and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Nagato, for the past two days, I’ve come across time-travelers that are different from Asahina-san and people that oppose Koizumi’s organization.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. So I was thinking, those aliens that you’ve mentioned may also have appeared somewhere out there,”

“Are you afraid?”

Nagato asked me without moving her head, she then gave me her own answer,

“I’m not afraid.”

You’re right, Nagato. I think the same as you do. I’m sure Asahina-san and Koizumi would agree as well. Since we all agree on the important things, let’s continue to be friends.

Nagato continued walking forward without saying a word, and I followed silently as well.

There is no need to say things that are plainly obvious, on this I'm pretty clear. The SOS Brigade is not an organization with five individuals, but a single entity whose name is called "the SOS Brigade". I know very well about this, and so there is no need to talk about it with someone who knows it even better than I do.

Chapter 7

Waiting in front of the station, Haruhi waved her hand madly like a cheerleader waving her flag the moment she saw me and Nagato arriving. Asahina-san stood just next to her, and a few steps away was Koizumi. Haruhi seems to be giddy to the point of being hysterical, while Asahina-san revealed a smile more cheerful than usual. Koizumi gave me a meaningful glance while flicking his bangs.

"Kyon, Yuki, you two sure are enjoying yourselves. Just where have you been?"

Haruhi said mischievously as she grabbed Nagato's little hands,

"I bet you two were probably having a date in the library. It'll be better if you actually find some mysterious stuff in there, so did you?"

"Of course we didn't."

There weren't books which would suck the reader into another world, or books that people would emerge out of. Maybe you'll have better luck finding one or two of these books in those large and antique libraries.

"I see, then we'll try looking for them in those old bookstores next time. I had wanted to rummage through Tsuruya-san's ancestral store room, but that's off limits for outsiders."

Haruhi began walking at her own pace without declaring where we're going, and as though reading her mind, Asahina-san and Koizumi smiled nonchalantly and followed her. Nagato and I have no choice but to follow as well.

I know very well that asking Haruhi "Where are you going?" was plain useless. Even if the destination was uncertain, she would still stride forward, then brake suddenly, point to where she's standing and declare proudly, "This is our destination!" If the SOS Brigade were to sail the uncharted seas under the guidance of Captain Haruhi, we might end up in Bermuda. Yet this time Haruhi simply led us to the Italian restaurant we'd been to yesterday.

During lunch I glanced thoughtfully at Asahina-san many times. While I was relieved to see her enjoy herself as she ate her seafood spaghetti with her knife and fork, I realized that very soon she would be busy spending time with my past self, I felt like telling her everything, at least I should tell her about her getting kidnapped…

While my mind was debating intensely, Haruhi suddenly roughly tapped the side of my plate with her fork and said,

"Kyon, what are you daydreaming about? If you have any problems, you can always tell the Commander."

Her glittering eyes were proof of her enthusiasm. Haruhi then spoke with the look of someone who was far from amused by an unfunny April Fool's joke,

"Oh yeah, you still remember that phone call you gave me? The prank call, that is, just what were you thinking?"

"Oh, that."

I gulped for a while and said,

"It was a stupid joke. I wasn't thinking properly then, if I had known the prank wouldn't work I wouldn't have called. Sorry about that."

I took a glance at Asahina-san, Haruhi did the same as well. Asahina-san replied with an "Eh?" and stopped sipping her spaghetti. We then turned to face each other again. "Not that it matters," Haruhi said generously, "Next time be more creative with your prank calls, I'll give you bonus points if the joke's funny. Once you collect enough points you get to redeem them for a little prize. But be prepared to get a massive points deduction if the joke's not funny at all! Remember that!"

Feels as though she's asking me to give her a prank call. Does this mean I have to think up of a joke every time I call her? Seeing me looking troubled, Haruhi and Asahina-san began to giggle quietly.

After lunch, Haruhi happily called it a day. I'd already heard from Asahina (Michiru)-san, but to dismiss the band after just a few hours in the morning… I guess having activities for two consecutive days was finally taking its toll on Haruhi as well, although she still remained as energetic as ever.

As we parted ways, Asahina-san smiled gently at me; Nagato remained expressionless; while Koizumi looked relaxed as though he'd seen it all.

I walked for a while before turning and calling out to Koizumi,

"I guess I owe you one."

"Oh don't mention it. I was merely taking precautionary measures, and I'm not confident that they're adequate. I was pretty much redundant during the car pursuit."

Were those cops in the police car really the Tamaru brothers? I somehow doubt that they're even brothers.

“Well you could say they’re my colleagues that sometimes pretend to be brothers who own a lone island mansion and run an investment enterprise, and sometimes pretend to be a pair of cops… would that do?”

What about Mori-san and Arakawa-san…? Especially Mori-san, I’m beginning to suspect what her true identity is.

“Is your organization working together with Asahina-san’s and Nagato’s bosses?”

“We aren’t directly working together, yet for some time we seem to have created an understanding with each other, and have even joined forces unknowingly. The world is now headed in a direction which I’m no longer familiar with, and it may be some time before everyone within the ‘Organization’ can be united in understanding and intent.”

As we continued to walk along the path, Koizumi shrugged his shoulders and said,

“There are some among us who actually hold the extremist view that Nagato-san and Asahina-san are just pitiful delusional girls who think they’re an alien or a time-traveler, and that there are no such things as aliens or time-travelers.”

Boy, they sure are stubborn even at this stage. These guys should come attached with a warranty for stubbornness.

“Well, they could argue that Nagato-san’s magical-like abilities and Asahina-san’s ability to travel through time are all triggered by Suzumiya-san, causing them to believe they’re an alien or a time-traveler… What do you think about that?”

If they can say even that, then what couldn’t they deny?

“Maybe the one with omnipotent powers isn’t Suzumiya-san after all, but rather someone else?”

Koizumi’s probably trying to add some sarcasm to his smile, yet all I saw was his usual grin.

“The eye of the storm is very calm, yet it is surrounded by calamity. Maybe there are some that decide to watch from the sidelines and see how all this unfolds. You sure have been kept busy as well, would a scriptwriter play such a tiring character himself?”

There he goes with his ambiguous statements again, but since I owe him one, I might as well listen. Though I can’t guarantee that I can remember everything, because if I could my grades would’ve improved by now.

“To be honest, I’m beginning to be marginalized. If you ask me where I belong, then I would have to say it’s with the SOS Brigade. My feelings tell me that rather than the ‘Organization’, the SOS Brigade is where I truly belong. I’ve thought about it before, should the ‘Organization’ come into conflict with the SOS Brigade, would I be stuck in a dilemma? You know what I mean?”

Just when I was preparing for one of Koizumi's long-winded speeches, this time he chose to finish it with his question and part company with me.

After I got home, I sat on the floor of my room, now completely covered with Shamisen's fur. The project with Asahina (Michiru)-san was over, but the project with Asahina-san (small) has only just begun. In other words, I still have work to do!

I also still had Letter #6 from the future:

"When everything is all over, please come to the park…"

I've already followed Letter #5's instruction and sent Asahina (Michiru)-san back to her time period where she came from, that just leaves Letter #6. But then what…

Was it really all over? I felt like something's stuck in my mind, but I couldn't think what it was, just like getting choked by a fish bone and not being able to spit it out.

It was pointless trying to squeeze dry a brain that's already empty, so I went back and read all of Asahina-san's (big) letters. The problem was that they were all so cryptic, I just couldn't guess what good following the instructions would bring, yet…

"Except this one,"

"Please head to the mountain. There lies a rock that stands out from the rest. Please move it three meters west of its original position. As for the exact location, Asahina Mikuru will know…"

Only this was linked with Haruhi, and this was the only place where everyone in the SOS Brigade had gathered. A fruitless treasure hunt, though I already knew the outcome beforehand…

As I was about to link all the missing pieces together, my sister charged in saying it was time for dinner. Reluctantly, I left my room. I decided to forget everything as I washed my hair in the shower. By the time I dipped my chin into the bath water, my mind will only be thinking of quickly getting some sleep.

As if right on cue, today's instruction finally arrived, save that it's from Haruhi instead of some time traveler, and instead of a letter in a shoe locker, the instruction came via the phone in my sister's hand.

"Kyon-kun, your phone. It's from Haru-nyan,"

My sister barged into the bathroom holding the cordless receiver, I quickly waved my hand and drove her out while placing the phone by my ear,

“Hello?”

“Oh, you’re taking a bath?”

Haruhi’s voice echoed through the bathroom walls. Yeah, I’m taking a bath, so don’t go around getting any funny ideas now.

“Of course I wouldn’t, you idiot. Anyway, as usual, we’ll meet tomorrow in front of the station, got it?”

Now you tell me, why couldn’t you say that when you dismissed the team earlier today?

“Well, I was sort of busy myself as well.”

I don’t remember you being considerate about other people’s free time.

“Shut up! Let’s meet in the afternoon, um… two o’clock would do. You can come empty handed,”

What about you?

“That’s none of your business. Remember, two o’clock tomorrow, if you dare stay away I’ll make you regret it for the rest of your life. Be punctual! See ya.”

Haruhi has always been swiftly straightforward when talking on the phone. I stepped out of the bathtub with the phone in my hand and thought as I dried myself with the towel.

“Here we go again, what is she up to this time?” Ever since entering into sulking mode in the beginning of February, Haruhi had gone through throwing soy beans in Setsubun, treasure hunting, and two consecutive days of mystery searching. Does she intend to end this all with a bang?

Hang on, how come I never heard any of this from Asahina (Michiru)-san? Meeting in front of the station tomorrow wasn’t included in her itinerary. Did she have anything to do with it, or did she know nothing about it, or maybe she was deliberately hiding this from me?

Please don’t tell me that this part of history never existed…

Yet arriving at the specified location at the specified time was becoming a habit for me. There were still five minutes remaining when I arrived in front of the station that afternoon, but the scene of seeing everybody already there waiting was more reliable than seeing the seasons changing from winter to spring.

The sun must be rising in the west! Not only did Haruhi not blame me for my late arrival, she didn't lead us into the coffee shop either. We walked together to the bus depot, there Haruhi shoved me onto the bus as though escorting a prisoner.

I was becoming aware of Asahina-san's constant yawns and attempts to cover her mouth quickly afterwards. I then noticed Haruhi also seemed to be lacking sleep as she kept rubbing her eyes. When she realized I was watching her, she quickly glared menacingly at me and turned her face away with a scowl to look at the scenery outside, which was becoming greener as the bus went along.

The bus drove towards the mountain, it was the same road we took when we went treasure hunting on Tsuruya-san's private hill.

We even got off the same bus stop. Don't tell me we're climbing Tsuruya Hill using the same route we took last time?

"That is actually the longer and less direct path. This time we're going to climb from the south side on the other side of the hill."

Haruhi walked with steady footsteps, followed by Asahina-san and Nagato as they climbed the hill for the second time without hesitation. Koizumi rubbed his chin and said,

"Let's go. We're here already, so there's no point in retreating anyway,"

While chortling like a pigeon.

Haruhi walked around the outer range of the hill and began climbing from the south side. I was now aware where we were headed, as I had been there for two consecutive days not long ago.

Besides the mountain forest, a dried grassy field appeared before our eyes. The first time I climbed this way was with Asahina (Michiru)-san, the second time I came down the hill this way with the SOS Brigade.

Haruhi led the way, picking the shortest route as she led her brigade to the gourd-shaped rock.

"So that's why…"

On the day when I moved the rock, the reason Asahina-san was able to guide me directly to the destination was because she had already climbed this hill many times.

And right now this Asahina-san was walking haphazardly while being dragged by Haruhi, with Nagato acting as her guardian and preventing her from falling.

Very soon we arrived at our destination. Haruhi quickly rushed onto the plateau, and as though finding a seat, sat right on top of the gourd-shaped rock,

“Kyon, Koizumi-kun, we now begin the second phase of the treasure hunt! Think carefully, we were too impatient to give up after digging for only one day, we can’t just leave empty handed!”

Haruhi revealed a bright sunshine smile as she took out two small shovels normally used for gardening from her coat pocket and threw them towards me and Koizumi.

“I had wanted you to dig using those large shovels like last time, so I’m letting you off the hook this time! There’s only one place we need to dig this time, and it’s right here!”

Haruhi pointed right in front of where she was sitting, at the side of the gourd-shaped rock. That was exactly where Koizumi and I had spent our life force digging as much as to two meters deep. Before I could say “We’ve already dug there before”, Haruhi spoke again,

“Isn’t it common that the things that people desperately want to find are actually lying in places which they’ve already gone through? The same goes for treasures, if you want to find them, you’ll have to go through the same spot carefully. When I say there’s treasure, then there has to be.”

Haruhi’s confidence is greater than the loyal dog of the Old Man who Made the Trees Blossom. Asahina-san nods her head and smiles in agreement, while Nagato doesn’t even move an eyebrow. In that case, I decide not to daydream while holding the shovel in my hand, and I began to understand why Koizumi was grinning.

I didn’t spend a lot of time or energy while digging, as the dirt that we piled back in was already quite soft, so even digging with a small shovel was easy. Not to mention as I just stuck the shovel in the dirt, it immediately hit something hard.

19 A senbei is a cracker made from rice.

Basking under the evil smile of Haruhi, I wiped the dirt away with my hands and picked up the object the shovel hit. The box I held didn’t seem to be from the Genroku period, it was more like a senbei[19] or cookie container. As I didn’t remember seeing this when digging with Koizumi three days ago, someone must have placed it in here during that time, but I didn’t have time to think of who it was that put it in.

“Well, open it,”

20 Shita-kiri Suzume (舌切り雀) is a traditional Japanese fable, telling of a kind old man, his avaricious wife, and an injured sparrow. The story explores the effects of greed, friendship, and jealousy on the characters.

Haruhi’s expression is like that of the Tongue-Cut Sparrow[20] when the kind old man who came to visit him chose his smaller present.

I held tight to the box and pulled the lid open with a “clang” sound,

"…"

There was no gold, not even a Koban coin[21]. But I don't think anyone would complain if I said there was indeed treasure inside.

21 The koban (小判) was an oval gold coin used in the Edo period.

There were six little boxes wrapped delicately with shiny wrappings, with a ribbon on top on each of them to boot.

Finally, as now was the most appropriate time to use the word "finally",

I suddenly remembered what day it was today. Instead of remembering, it was more like noticing. For some guys, this day was far more meaningful than July 7th.

Today was February 14th.

Valentine's Day.

"I made them myself,"

Haruhi leaned forward and explained,

"Last night, I've been working all night with Mikuru-chan and Yuki and even had to spend the night at Yuki's place. We had originally wanted to use just cocoa powder to make chocolates, but we thought that was too grandiose. So in the end we decided to make chocolate cakes instead!"

On each box wrapping there was a sticker with the name of myself or Koizumi handwritten by the girls; we both got three of these each.

Koizumi put down his shovel and picked up one of the boxes after elegantly wiping his hands free of dust. On top it was labeled "For Koizumi-kun - From Mikuru-chan". Now that's a treasure, made by the very hands of Asahina-san!

Like a machine gun, Haruhi began to fire away,

"Of course it is! We made it specifically for you guys, it was fun and exhausting when we made it, but we're fine. I had been feeling uneasy about this secret plan, as I had wanted to laugh at you guys for falling for it, but what's the point? In the end, this has become a well-accepted tradition after all. Though there are still some that insist that this is all some conspiracy conjured up by the confectionery industry, seriously are they nuts? Anyway, I had fun making these with Yuki and Mikuru-chan, we even thought of adding pepper inside at first. Well, what's with that face of yours?"

“Oh it’s nothing, I’m actually so grateful I could weep.” That’s what I truly thought, since I had completely forgotten about the very day that all the men in the country had been so looking forward to. If I had known then I would have prepared some charming words, but this had come all so suddenly that I was at a loss on what to say to the three female brigade members. I was neither good enough to make an elegant response, nor was I prepared to act embarrassed. Perhaps that means I’ve still got lots to learn in life.

My whole body relaxed, now everything makes sense. Haruhi’s irregular behavior at the beginning of February, the Asahina-san that traveled from the future not revealing any further details concerning the true nature of the treasure hunt, and Taniguchi’s sudden dumping by his girlfriend…

Haruhi sure is something, so she was bothered by how she could give chocolates to me all this time, but she just wouldn’t admit it. She could’ve just gave them to me in the classroom, but instead she had to come up with treasure hunting as an excuse, just so we could dig a hole for her to bury the chocolates inside, that’s how indirect she is. Does that mean Tsuruya-san was an accomplice to this as well? The treasure map was probably fake as well, the fact that Haruhi gave up the hunt so easily meant she knew there was no treasure all along. That was because the treasure she mentioned had not yet been buried until the suitable time. So it was this treasure - the three pieces of chocolate cake Koizumi and I each received - that made Haruhi so uneasy, she even dragged Asahina-san and Nagato into it as well.

Now how should I say this…

“You stupid idiot!” That was for both Haruhi, who had planned this, and for myself, who had not figured this out earlier.

“They’re just obligation chocolates! They should be obligation chocolates, sort of! Actually I don’t know why they have to call it obligation chocolates. Chocolates and chocolate cakes are both made of cocoa anyway,”

Haruhi sounded like one of those strange insects chirping in the autumn grass fields. I slowly made an effort to lift my head up.

What I saw was Haruhi’s eyes looking glaringly at me, Asahina-san smiling gracefully like an adorable girl who just did some mischief, and Nagato looking blankly at my hands.

“I’m extremely grateful for this gift. I’ll definitely enjoy it,”

Koizumi spoke before I could… Haruhi twitched her lips and said,

“I hope you quickly finish them all when you get home, even better if you do it before dinner! Don’t take them as offerings to some shrine!”

Haruhi hurriedly turned her head away, and then quickly stood up,

“Let’s go home. If we don’t leave after the activity ends, we’ll get stuck in a traffic jam on the way back. Boy, I feel sleepy, we worked all the way till sunrise, you know? And we had to come and bury them here afterwards, so by the time I got back to Yuki’s place I only slept for two hours. Mikuru-chan and Yuki as well!”

On the return trip, when we were waiting for the bus at the bus stop, Haruhi stood furthest away from me and stared at the skies, totally avoiding eye contact with me. Oh boy.

I whispered to Asahina-san who was standing besides me,

“Do you have anyone that you like?”

“Um,”

Asahina-san said looking despondent,

“Even if I did fall for someone here, we would have to part when it’s time for me to go back to the future. That would be too painful for me…”

Such an impeccable way of thinking, there was no way I could argue against that. Yet even when faced with such a perfect argument, I was still hesitant on whether to accept this fate.

“Then don’t go back,” I said, “This time period isn’t that bad, is it? You can always go back to the future anytime, only you will have made your new home here.”

“Hee hee, thanks,”

Asahina-san smiled gently, I was really tempted to kiss those pink lips of hers, which were like a flower that had just blossomed.

“It’s just that this period isn’t the period where I was born, my home is in the future. I mean, as this is technically my past, I’m simply a visitor here. The future is where my present and where my home belongs. Someday I would have to go back.”

22 Kaguya-Hime is a 10th century Japanese folk tale about a mysterious girl, Princess Kaguya. The full narrative is available on the Wikipedia article.

She is like the Kaguya-Hime[22], nothing can be done to stop her from leaving the mortal world when the fated time arrives, since she doesn’t belong here after all, or at least that’s what I truly think. If I were to go back a few hundred years into the past, at first I would be feeling curious about the new environment I was in, but after a while, I would begin to miss the advanced tools and machines, the crisp display of a video game, the microwaved boxed lunch from the local convenience store, and trying to write a meaningless text message or make a phone call that

transcends time with my cell phone. In any case, nothing beats being able to sleep in a nice warm bed in your own room.

Even if she could do all the same stuff in this time period, Asahina-san would probably still feel out of place here. She is, after all, just a visitor, and I guess if a person is in a place that doesn't feel like home, she would probably feel unsettled as well.

"Oh, b… but…"

Asahina-san frantically waved her hands and explained,

"This doesn't mean I'm unhappy here. I've found staying here to be quite meaningful, allowing me to work hard to become even better. Actually I'm grateful that you have always been by my side, Kyon-kun."

I was very delighted to hear her say that, so I decided to try something to see how she really feels,

"All right then, when the time comes for you to return to the future… Why don't you take me along?"

Though Haruhi's not going to keep quiet about it if that were to happen.

"Then we could have an SOS Brigade tour of the future. We'll bring Haruhi, Nagato, and Koizumi as well, I can guarantee there'll be no complaints from them. Hmm, now that I think about it, it wouldn't be too bad moving to the future either."

"Eh!?"

The fairy-like round eyes now widened in astonishment,

"N-No, you mustn't! That sort of action is absolutely forbidden…"

The fear in Asahina-san's face stayed for a while, but then she noticed my expression. She quickly shut her mouth and her shoulders began to move gently,

"Hee hee, really, stop making such serious jokes. You gave me a scare."

"Sorry."

Yup, it was obviously a joke. The time period where I must exist is here in the present, though I have gone through lots of hardship, including having to travel to and from three to four years in the past; yet right now, the SOS Brigade club room is still the place where I would go. It's still less than a year in high school, Haruhi still has plenty of peculiar ideas waiting to be explored, and it's likely she won't give up so easily. So it's still a bit early to think about leaving everything behind and escaping to the future.

There will come a day when Asahina-san would return to the future, but at least for now she is still with us, and that is enough. If all the happy moments were to be joined up together like beads in a necklace, the future would probably become interesting as well. Asahina-san once described the various time planes as a series of still images in a cartoon. In that case, if every page consists of comedy, then it's simply impossible for the last page to contain any horror elements. I'll never allow that to happen, I mean, who would?

I once lost Haruhi and my friends from the SOS Brigade for a brief while, but now they're back within my embrace. I'll never forget that determination I had then. No matter what difficulties I'll face, how many times I fall, I'll never stop going forward. I'm not the sort of bridge-burning expert that would so easily abandon a decision I made just two months ago. I only ask that the exclamation "yare yare" be reserved exclusively for me.

In other words, no matter how cheap one's self esteem is, the price would still be too high to be able to sell it in a flea market auction. Even if one were to sigh "yare yare", it'll be fine as long as he's willing to give it his best. Nobody cares about the dialog anyway, whether it's "Haruhi, you idiot," or "Take me with you," it's fine if you keep as quiet as Nagato as well. In a three-legged race, everyone's foot is strapped with their companion, as it's impossible to run a three-legged race by tying one's own legs together, and it's even more fun running with five people in a six-legged race.

After the events of the past week, I came up with the above realizations.

It's been quite some time, starting with the ritual of meeting in front of the station to coming back to call it a day here. All this time today Haruhi has turned her face away, she didn't even bother talking with her back turned to me. As Our Excellency the Commander then walks away in great strides, I wonder just what sort of expression she would appear with in the classroom tomorrow?

I made sure the boxes were still in my pocket as I thanked both Asahina-san and Nagato. Asahina-san even bowed apologetically, "I'm sorry for hiding this from you, because Suzumiya-san had forbidden us to say anything…" What's really amazing is that Haruhi had managed to keep Nagato's mouth shut as well. Anyway, it was understandable, since even I had completely forgotten such an important day. After going through so much stuff, the arrival of Valentine's Day was the last thing I could think of then and it had quietly slipped past my consciousness.

I entered my room and hurriedly opened the three small boxes, but I did not intend to have them as my dinner as Haruhi had asked me to. Inside the transparent plastic box was a cake coated with a chocolate layer.

Haruhi's cake was round, while Asahina-san's was heart-shaped, and Nagato's was star-shaped. On top of every cake were some words written using white chocolate cream.

Haruhi simply wrote the description of the cake “CHOCOLATE”; Nagato’s cake was written in very proper handwriting “COURTESY”; while Asahina-san’s was written “OBLIGATION CHOCOLATE”, just when I was thinking this doesn’t sound like her style, I noticed there was more to it. Under her box was the corner of a handkerchief, with a message that read “Suzumiya-san asked me to write it like that,” It seems to have been written in a hurry. I imagined how the three of them worked their hats off in Nagato’s kitchen, and then placed the three present boxes into the refrigerator. That reminds me, I gotta remind my sister not to nick those cakes as well.

As the sun began to set, I got on my bike and began pedaling.

The final checkpoint was near Nagato’s apartment complex, the long bench inside the park.

Inside the dim, empty park, the bench that was brightly illuminated by the street lamps was empty. Even after parking my bike and walking into the park, there was not a single person in sight.

I sat on the icy-cold bench and said towards the air,

“Are you there, Asahina-san?”

A rustling noise was heard from the bushes behind the bench, and the person I was waiting for walked around the bench and made her appearance,

“Is it okay for me to sit down?”

Of course it is, we may even chat for a long while.

“Hee hee, I’m afraid I might have to make things brief.”

Asahina-san’s (big) elegantly beautiful figure was now sitting on the empty space beside me. Wearing winter attire, Asahina-san was no different from anyone else, save that frost-melting beauty of hers.

After inhaling the cold air of winter, I breathed out some white vapors and said,

“Can you explain everything now?”

“Now where should I start?”

“You can start from the first prank which the little Asahina-san and I had to carry out like an errand.”

The prank where a poor man had to go to hospital for getting his foot injured after kicking a can that was nailed to the ground. It now felt like ages ago when I mentioned it again.

“Was that really necessary?”

Asahina-san tilted her head and smiled softly,

“Kyon-kun, please think carefully. Whether it be a few years ago or a few decades ago, if you could go back to the past…”

She carefully chose her words,

“And witness history in the making. Yet when that history is different from what you remember, what would you do?”

“What do you mean by ‘different?’” I didn’t understand what she was getting at.

“Let’s say if you went back to one year ago today, what were you doing then?”

Probably shut up in my room playing video games. I don’t remember getting giddy over someone sending me chocolates then.

Asahina-san nodded her head slightly,

“Now try to imagine a situation that’s different from that version of the past. When you travel back to your home one year ago, but find that you weren’t living there. Instead of your sister or your parents, the place was now occupied by another family. Even your relatives have become different from the ones which you knew, living a totally different life in another place…”

How is that possible?

“When, after traveling to the past we find out that history is slightly different than it was as we knew it, do you know what we from the future would think? If every moment in history depended on interference from the future, then our future would never be able to exist if we did not interfere, and everything would change…”

Asahina-san’s voice began to stray away, as though feeling nostalgic about something.

“A past where someone dies when they’re supposed to live; or where two people have never even seen each other when they’re supposed to be good friends; if we leave these situations alone, then our future would never arrive…”

Her lonely smile was now cast in a lonely shroud,

“I’ll get to the point. The person who got injured kicking the empty can that you placed will meet a certain lady in the hospital. Afterwards, they get married and have children, and pass the torch

to the next generation. This was all because he went to the hospital that day, otherwise those two would never have met in their whole lives."

An image of the man smiling uncomfortably while looking up at me and Asahina-san flashed before my eyes.

"The memory device was the same, it was necessary to deliver the data in that condition. Someone may have stumbled on similar data by coincidence, only this coincidence didn't exist in the past, perhaps it was erased. That was why we had to deliver the data ourselves, and try our best to make it look like a coincidence."

"Someone picks up a memory device from a flower bed, and just happens to send it to someone else at the right address." - She continued to explain.

I didn't know how to respond. That sure wasn't coincidental, not to mention the freak that appeared then, and handed the memory device to us. If he had decided to create trouble, then how would things turn out?

"He wouldn't dare, that piece of data means everything to the existence of his future as well. That was why he came to this time period,"

Asahina-san elaborated in simple terms.

"For us future time-travelers, that is a predetermined event; but for you and the recipient of the data, it's a coincidence. That's how time works,"

"…"

I feel a bit dizzy, maybe it's because the dialog had broken through the boundaries of my comprehension with so much ease.

"It was also coincidence that the boy had seen the turtle. He will always remember the little turtle he obtained from a young man and young woman, as well as the ripples caused by the young man dropping the turtle into the water, and how the ripples slowly disappear as they dispersed from the center. As turtles live very long lives, every time he picks up the turtle he would always think of the scene he saw then. Though there were many other factors, but it all came from this event, which would inspire him to formulate a set of basic theories."

Could it be… while feeling dizzy, my imagination began to go wild. Perhaps that boy would one day become the inventor of the time machine, and the one who inspired him to think about the turtle turns out to be me, causing changes in the future. Thanks to my unconscious interference, that boy and the future of this world has…

A memory from a corner of my brain was suddenly awoken. It was a few days before the school festival, something that Nagato said to me at a time when I was mightily busy while shooting the climax of the movie,

In order to stabilize the future, it is necessary to input the correct value. Asahina Mikuru's mission is to adjust that variable to an acceptable value.

Now was not the time to be feeling giddy about how good my memory was. The ambiguous phrase "in order to stabilize the future"… "There could only be one future, whether it was stable or not, right?" I had long since abandoned that idea.

Could the future be unstable?

In other words, could there exist other futures apart from Asahina-san's future?

It would make sense if that's the case, but only a little. If the future really diverged into many different branches, then there once existed two futures where the boy survives in one and is now dead in the other, it's just that I've killed off the possibility of the latter from ever happening.

That means thanks to my help, I had destroyed one future completely.

I didn't know if that was the correct answer. Even though this deduction was so weak that if I were to say "Here's a problem for our readers to discuss", I'd probably be condemned as an idiot; but it wasn't easy trying to dispel a wild thought that I had just formulated. When I thought about this, I just didn't know what to say. Was there more?

"The divergence points are mostly concentrated in this time period, though a lot would end up the same, anyway; but the things that you have done the past few days, if not done, would create divergences that would lead to all sorts of futures…"

Asahina-san's charming voice began to grow weak,

"Very soon you will be faced with a great divergence, a choice that would cause a great change to the future… If you chose the other side, then it… um… it wouldn't be good for our future."

I suddenly felt stiff for no reason, and I had wanted to turn and face Asahina-san. Damn, why can't I turn my face!?

"But it doesn't matter, because I can trust you, right?"

My consciousness began to blur, a familiar image begins to form in my dizzy mind, two curvy lines criss-crossing each other. The figure on the white board rotated in my mind, and in this whirlpool I saw two spots marked "X". There were two X's, that's what Koizumi said.

The past can never be completely erased. After being amended, history would simply be rewritten over its original time-space.

This triggered another memory - we had experienced being in that never-ending two weeks of summer vacation for thousands of times already.

Except for Nagato, the rest of us only remembered what happened in the final two weeks, the previous thousands of times were as though they never existed. Then the answer became obvious.

The past can be erased, in fact it wasn't a question of whether it existed or not. Even if it did, it's as good as non-existent if no one had noticed it. So in order to achieve that…

One would need to erase all memories of that past.

If all my memories of my experience between December 18th and 21st, as well as leaping back three years ago and getting stabbed by Asakura were all erased, what would have happened to me when I woke up in the hospital bed? I would probably have believed what Koizumi had told me - that I merely tripped down the stairs and knocked my head, then lain unconscious for three days.

Nagato the Literature Club member, Asahina-san the Calligraphy Club member, Haruhi with her surprisingly fitting ponytail, and Koizumi as a completely normal person. If my memories of these people were each erased, then one would not have to worry about any time loops or traveling back in time to fix history.

Yet, things just wouldn't fit that way.

In the early morning of the 18th, after being attacked by Asakura, as I came close to death, I saw myself from the future. I realized then that I had to go back to that time. The only person who could provide a remedy to the astray Nagato was Nagato from three years ago, and the person to execute that remedy was the Nagato from January 2nd. Only these were essential.

After that, time was rewritten…

I felt myself shivering. Haruhi knew absolutely nothing about this, neither did Taniguchi or Kunikida. The only ones who knew about this were me, Nagato, Asahina-san, and Koizumi who had heard about it.

If that's the case, it's not impossible that I could already be in Haruhi's position. I might or might not be aware that history was being rewritten; if I did not possess the original memories, then the "truth" would never exist.

Besides, it's possible that while I was worrying about all these considerations in the present, my past could be rewritten in another time period. My present self would cease to exist, my past self would move towards another future, and this was all because of the alteration in that time period.

"Erase all your memories concerning this incident."

"No one can guarantee that something that hasn't happened would ever occur."

The Asahina-san from a week later once guaranteed that she has never seen herself, so I went to great lengths to make sure they never see each other. If they really do meet, I don't suppose much harm could be done.

That's because the problem could be solved simply by erasing the present Asahina-san's memory, so that when she travels back to the past a week ago she wouldn't have remembered a thing. So it doesn't make much of a difference whether they met or not.

I felt a surge of negative feelings coming from my chest, this being the same feeling that I vented against the Integrated Data Sentient Entity when lying in the hospital bed last time, but this time those feelings were towards Asahina-san (big).

She had been toying with her past self, that is Asahina-san (small), in the palm of her hand. Making this Asahina-san play the role of a clumsy and unreliable cute elder-sister. Yeah, I know you had no choice, but to allow your past self to experience history as you had remembered it. This must be what Koizumi was saying about the future doing something about the past. But couldn't you come up with something better?

The curse that was constraining my head was finally released, I nearly spent an hour just trying to get out of this dizziness. Yet by the time I wanted to say what I was feeling, I found there was no one standing beside me.

Asahina-san had vanished into thin air just next to me, only I remained sitting on the bench under the dimly lit street lamps. However, in Asahina-san's place on the bench was a small box.

It was a delicately wrapped, square-shaped box with a ribbon on top.

It even came with a card. Placing it under the light, I found a single line that said, "Happy Valentine."

A box of chocolate that could be found anywhere, without any flavors or styles from the future. Are chocolate recipes the same throughout the ages? Or did she make this chocolate according to the recipes of this time period?

"But Asahina-san…"

You can't just keep me quiet like that. Yeah, you did make an exception and provided information, but that's not good enough. Leaving aside the fact that you said nothing about you getting kidnapped, but you were obviously hiding the truth behind Haruhi's treasure hunting and the gourd-shaped rock on purpose! That's right, there's something fishy about this. Haruhi could have buried the chocolates anywhere, for what reason must it be buried by that gourd-shaped rock? And why did it have to be moved in the first place?

Could this all be within the calculations of Asahina-san (big)? Has she clearly listed everything that I would do in her pre-determined list?

“Everything is now over…”

Looks like it’s still too early for that. There’ll come a day when I would come to this place again, I might very well bring everyone from the SOS Brigade then, so you’d better come up with a satisfactory explanation for Koizumi and Haruhi! I’m just a mere observer, after all.

I quickly made a phone call,

“Hello? Is this Tsuruya-san? It’s me, well um, Michiru-san has gone home already, she wanted me to thank you for taking care of her, and she said she would return the clothes you lent her… huh, really? Oh and, when you see Asahina-san the day after tomorrow apologizing to you for no reason, please let her be. And can you please bring the North High uniform she left behind to school tomorrow? Yes, bring it to me before school ends,”

This was all that I needed to do up till now, after hearing Tsuruya-san going “Okay~” on the other side of the phone, I adjusted my breathing and said,

“There’s one more thing I need to tell you, and this is the most important. You know your family’s private hill? The one with the treasure map, that is. I see, it’s fine. I never thought Haruhi would go in such a large circle just to… Yeah, I got four, um I mean, three from them. It’s pretty interesting,”

I tried to suppress Tsuruya-san’s deafening laughter and continued,

“You know from that treasure map, you could actually climb the hill from a path that leads from the marsh grass fields? Great, that makes things easier to explain. From this path you’ll come to a flat plateau, do you know there’s a rock that resembles the shape of a gourd? I’m not kidding, honest. Go east about three meters from that rock and try digging on that spot, who knows, you might find something.”

I then said to Tsuruya-san, who was sounding very puzzled,

“I don’t have any evidence, so I can’t be absolutely sure. But there should be something,”

If I hadn’t moved the stone from that place, Haruhi would have probably asked us to dig on that spot the moment she saw the rock. And she might have ended up discovering something that’s not supposed to be found and discovered.

All I did was merely move the stone westwards for about three meters.

After giving some random responses to Tsuruya-san, I hung up the phone.

This is a small act of defiance from me, Asahina-san (big). I have no intention of playing mind games with you and your different versions of futures, I just want to play a prank from time to time.

Though I wouldn't go as far as Haruhi would, of course.

Epilogue

The next day, after just making it to school on time I barged into the classroom, and ignoring Taniguchi looking grumpy and Kunikida chatting with other classmates, I sat down and began flirting with the person behind me,

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“I’m fine, of course!”

Has Haruhi’s gentle cat-smile, an indicator of her being up to no good, returned? Whoa! She didn’t even look at me when she made that grin. Looks like she’s the sort that would change moods after sleeping for one night.

When the first bell rang, Haruhi stretched her neck from behind and whispered to my ear,

“Kyon, I’m warning you, don’t go around talking about what happened yesterday. Especially not to Taniguchi. This has got be kept a secret at all costs, or else it’ll be so embarra… ahem, anyway just don’t go around announcing it. Gifts are best cherished.”

What the hell are you talking about? Once something has entered my pocket, don’t even think of wanting it back, especially when it comes to food!

“Who says I’m asking you to return it? What are you getting so uptight for? If I wanted it back, I wouldn’t have given it to you in the first place. Anyway, we’re gonna be busy after school, so be prepared.”

Roger that. Actually, I haven’t been able to relax today, as I’ve got to send today’s Asahina-san back to eight days ago as well as receive the Asahina-san traveling from two days ago. Only then would this long week come to a close.

During lunch that day, Tsuruya-san came to the classroom to look for me. It was good that Haruhi, who rarely brings a boxed lunch, had gone to the cafeteria. I put down my half-eaten boxed lunch and headed towards her as she yelled “Kyon-kun~!”

“Let’s talk somewhere else,”

Tsuruya-san pulled my tie and dragged me towards the staircase before stopping just next to the door leading towards the roof. Haruhi had also brought me to this dark staircase, with all sorts of arts and crafts scattered about as before.

“I’ll cut to the chase,”

Tsuruya-san smiled cautiously and took out a stack of photos from her pocket.

“Kyon-kun, just how did you know there was something buried there? That totally took me by surprise, you know.”

You actually found something? So what did you find?

“Enough to surprise you!”

Tsuruya-san spread out the photos in a fan shape,

“The first surprise is, when I began digging, there really was a three-hundred-year-old pot down there coming out to say ‘hi’ to me!”

The photo she handed to me showed a pot with cracks all over, using a white wall as a background.

“Are you sure it’s over three-hundred years?

“Absolutely sure! I even took it for some radiometric dating, but it’s what’s inside that’s even more amazing!”

The second photograph showed a crummy old piece of paper, with some words written in hiragana, but it still looked blurry to me. The only thing I could see clearly was a familiar picture of a mountain on the edge of the paper, with a small “X” written on it. No guesswork was required to figure out what the “X” was referring to in the plateau.

“This was really written by Tsuruya Yauemon, my great-great ancestor. The letter says ‘I felt a bit uneasy after obtaining such a strange object, so I decided to bury it’, it’s dated at 15 Genroku.”

Haruhi also mentioned something like that being written on her treasure map, but that was a copy, while this was the real thing.

“But this Yauemon-jisan sure is absent minded, burying the letter and the treasure together. How are we supposed to find it that way?”

Tsuruya-san smiled as she pointed to a third photo.

“What’s this?”

As the object was within the frames of the photo, I had no idea how large it actually was. It looked like a metallic rod about ten centimeters long. The surface was still shining so brightly it didn’t look like it had been buried for three-hundred years. Upon closer inspection, one could see lines that resembled circuit wires, spread all over like a spider web. The pattern looked irregular at first sight, yet it was elegantly symmetric. Was this really something made during the Edo period?

“We only found the letter and this in the pot! But here comes the problem, no one would believe that our ancestors’ time capsule could contain with such a thing…”

Tsuruya-san enthusiastically waved the photos and said,

“Let me tell you, that thing is made of a titanium-cesium alloy!”

Now that was truly shocking, I should find Kunikida and tell him so I could freak myself out again.

“It’s simply impossible to find the technology on earth three-hundred years ago to make such an alloy. The guy who helped me do the testing said if this was really from hundreds of years ago, then it either has to be an artifact from some super ancient civilization, or an item that a future time-traveler left before, or else it could be the fragment of an alien spaceship!”

…Please don’t let it be from a super ancient civilization…

“But, doesn’t this looks like a spare part for some object?”

Tsuruya-san studied the third photo and then smiled cheerfully towards me,

“So what do you think, Kyon-kun? Would you pick an alien or a time traveler?”

I was left speechless when her innocent face suddenly came up with such a question.

“It would be better for you to decide quickly!”

The mysterious object found inside the pot stamped with the seal of the Tsuruya clan was placed under safe-keeping at the Tsuruya residence. It was reassuring to see Tsuruya-san slapping her chest as she promised to take good care of it, but that’s to be expected. The priority is to make sure Haruhi hears nothing about this, but to be honest, I’ve got a bad feeling about it. I hope things will never turn out that way, and truth be told, I don’t want to think about it any more…

I just have a feeling this spare part would make itself useful one day.

I wonder if I’ve told Tsuruya-san about this too soon? Would it have been a better idea, not telling anyone as well as not digging it myself?

But could I do it? After realizing something amazing must be buried there, could I play dumb and pretend there’s nothing there? My curiosity burns so strongly that if I see a word I don’t understand, I search the internet until I find out everything about it.

Besides, Haruhi might have decided to go back and dig some more. So it was good for this mysterious device that it could return to the safe-keeping of Tsuruya clan. Should a day arrive

when the people from the ancient civilization, time travelers, or aliens would appear to claim the device back, judging from Haruhi's behavior, she would certainly tell them to go to hell. I never want her to see such an object, because those people would probably disguise their identities just as Asahina-san and Nagato have. Instead of traveling back to the past to keep the present intact, it's better to do my best to take precautions against any unforeseen events in the future, since the present is where I reside, after all.

After parting ways with Tsuruya-san and returning to the classroom, I found Haruhi munching on my boxed lunch.

"Hey! That's mine!"

"Of course, I know that! I wouldn't eat a stranger's boxed lunch."

That doesn't mean you should eat the boxed lunch of someone you know! Spit it out!

"Let's leave that aside for now," Haruhi placed the chopsticks into the empty boxed lunch and shoved it over, while looking at me with a strange expression,

"What's with that gross expression, just what're you grinning at?"

Grinning? You tell me why on earth I would grin. Touching my face, I realized Haruhi was telling the truth, the muscles on my face must have been either relaxed or contorted.

"Freak."

After making such a rude remark, Haruhi turned her head away. Her silky hair waved along and revealed her tiny ears.

At this point I suddenly understood something.

The reason why I'm unconsciously grinning. I wonder how I could still grin after going through so much this past week. Aside from having to spend time with the other Asahina-san, a new group of time-travelers and another esper organization have appeared, trying to cause all sorts of mischief like kidnapping Asahina-san. I won't be seeing the last of them, not to mention a rival alien faction could stick their heads in as well. To add insult to injury, a mysterious device was dug up on the hill. It just isn't the time to grin like an idiot.

Anyone who thinks that way is a simplistic idiot, and I have no intention of becoming one. That's right, by now I've realized this point, which was why I didn't keep such an uptight expression.

To date I've already experienced plenty of unfortunate events, and it will probably go on this way. However, I don't seem to be fazed by it all; in fact, I now feel that no matter what comes my way, they could bring it on.

Was it because I didn't give a damn about them? The wave would be imminent, but I won't be alone! I would have Nagato, Koizumi, and Asahina-san by my side supporting me, while Haruhi would place her hands on her waist and sit in front of me with her legs crossed, and Tsuruya-san would stand behind me laughing all the way. I don't care whether you're an ally, a foe, a neutral, or just have a common interest with us, so bring it on!

I closed the lid on the boxed lunch Haruhi handed me, and covered it with a handkerchief before placing it in my bag.

Calling me a freak, aren't you looking just as freakish with that expression of yours? Did I really look weird just now?

"Hey, Haruhi,"

"What?"

I said to Haruhi, who had wrinkles on her forehead,

"The future of the SOS Brigade depends on you."

Haruhi looked stunned for a while,

"Of course it does!"

Her lips instantly formed a grin as she shouted,

"I founded this brigade, after all!"

After school, thinking that my work would be done once I had arranged for the two Asahina-sans to switch places, I had nearly forgotten about the "favor" Haruhi asked me to be ready for earlier this morning. Well, I didn't exactly forget, it's just that this activity was much bigger than I had expected.

First, Haruhi said she was planning to hold a lottery using Amidakuji, with Asahina-san dressed as a miko while giving out the prize to the winner; then the drawing point of this contest turned out to be…

"The SOS Brigade's Belated Asahina Mikuru Handmade Valentine's Day Chocolate Amidakuji Contest! Admission is 500 yen each!"

When I think of Haruhi carrying her loudspeaker and making her presence known everywhere, I shudder as I am reminded of how naively stupid I had been.

At the Belated Asahina-san Handmade Valentine's Day Chocolate Amidakuji Contest, the papers used for drawing lots were as long as a large scroll. Though the admission fee was a whopping 500 yen, I can imagine everyone fighting to get in the front of the line as we cheerfully watch our income grow rapidly to a five digit sum. Besides Koizumi's and mine, it seems Asahina-san had made a third obligatory chocolate as well for this occasion. Like hell I was going to donate my chocolate cake for this god-forsaken contest anyway.

"Actually, Nagato-san was the one who helped out in everything…"

Dressed in a miko attire suitable for any time period if she were to travel through time, Asahina-san stood on the grass field out at the courtyard and spoke apologetically to me. Once home room session was over, Haruhi had gone and dragged Asahina-san into the club room and forced her to put on that miko costume, though I have no idea how she obtained it. Looks like Haruhi was still feeling inspired about what I had incidentally said while throwing beans during Setsubun.

Under Haruhi's barked orders, Koizumi and I carried the long table from the club room downstairs and placed it on the grass field outside. Haruhi then held up her loudspeaker and began to make her move, while Nagato was assigned the task of cashier.

Very quickly, the male students began to swarm the courtyard like zombies attracted by fresh meat. The atmosphere was so surreal one can't help, but worry about the state this country was headed to. When I saw that even Taniguchi and Kunikida were amongst the crowd, I began to worry about the future of my classmates as well.

Using her loudspeaker, Haruhi began to organize the crowd which was largely guys with a few girls scattered around,

"If you want to participate, line up here in front of Yuki! You'll be handed a number card once you've paid your 500 yen. Once you have the card, head to Koizumi-kun, where he'll write your number in your preferred slot as well as draw as many horizontal lines wherever you like!"

As Nagato efficiently dealt with the queue, Koizumi had to frantically draw lots of straight lines with a ruler on the large B4 paper. It seems he would need more than one piece of paper, as it looks like he'll be drawing hundreds of lines.

The number of papers that Koizumi had to cellotape together increased at the same pace as the number of times I turned to glance at my watch. Oh shit, at this rate, I'll never make it on time…

Asahina (Michiru)-san would return on 4:16PM, so I had to send this Asahina-san away by 4:15PM, not to mention the time needed for her to change back to her uniform first.

The minute hand had already gone past 4 o'clock, but Nagato still hadn't finished handing out the number cards, and Koizumi still had plenty of lines to draw.

Asahina-san stood by the side, holding the present box, her smile rather stiff for a mascot. Looks rather cold to cosplay as a miko at this time of year, doesn't it? But there's no point in wondering about these issues. As I was busy calculating how long it would take to change from a miko costume to a school uniform, the Amidakuji was finally complete. As expected, the papers used are together as long as a large scroll. It's certainly a scene to behold.

Haruhi casually picked up a pen and randomly picked one line out of dozens of them, and drew a heart shape at the bottom, she then added another bunch of horizontal lines.

"Now come! Only one can reach this heart and win the Valentine Chocolate handmade by Asahina! You'll definitely cry tears of joy if you win! We'll begin on the right side!"

It was already exhausting trying to trace which line the heart would reach from, but are you trying to kill me by wasting so much more time!? Though the odds of winning in one go are now very slim, Haruhi is sure putting a lot of effort into stirring up the atmosphere, but I really don't have much time for this!

Oblivious to my anxiety, Haruhi placed the portable hi-fi on the table and pressed the play button, a cheerful melody began to play. *Orpheus in the Underworld*? This isn't a sports fair, dammit! (It's common for Japanese schools to play this song during sports fairs.)

Looks like I've got to resort to desperate measures, I must have pretty good karma for Lady Luck to be sitting right by my side.

"I'm sorry, Nagato,"

I pretend to look at the coins and paper money stacked up like a hill inside the senbei box as I whisper softly to the ear of the cashier sitting on the chair beside the table,

"Please let this draw be over in one try, there's no time left!"

Nagato was staring straight at Asahina-san, shivering non-stop because of the cold wind, as she heard my prayer. She then turned to take a glance at me, and then silently stood up. Just before Haruhi began drawing lots from the right side with a red pen, Nagato quietly and elegantly adds one more line.

Ten minutes later, I was pulling Asahina-san's little hand and rushing towards the club room.

"Wah, Kyon-kun…! It hurts, what's going on?"

Even if it means having to drag Asahina-san and make her cry, I couldn't care less anymore, as there are only five minutes left!

"I'll explain everything to you afterwards, but we'll be in trouble if we don't hurry!"

I carried the tiny miko upper-classman and climbed up the stairs three steps at a time.

As expected from Nagato, the draw was over in just one draw. Seeing how the first student chosen had won the prize so effortlessly, besides being stunned, Haruhi and everyone else couldn't hide their disappointment. Well, there's only one winner after all, so don't take it personally, guys. Still keen on keeping the atmosphere on a high, Haruhi changed the background music this time to *See, the Conqu'ring hero comes*. She then forcefully pulled the student who had card number 56 and made the student stand face to face with Asahina-san. By the way, the winner was a cute, curly-haired first-year girl - the way she looked shy and embarrassed sure was mesmerizing. Under a strange atmosphere, Asahina-san stiffly passed the chocolate to the girl, and under Haruhi's instruction, they both shook hands, at which point the crowd suddenly roared into a thunderous applause. I didn't understand what they were so joyous for. I still had to wait for Haruhi to take a photo of the two of them with a tripod camera she obtained from god-knows where. It's gonna be troublesome if this goes on any longer!

I quickly grabbed Asahina-san's hand before she even had a chance to say anything, and headed straight for the building complex without time to even come up with an excuse. Finally, we arrived at the door of the club room.

"Eh, where, wha…? Kyon-kun…?"

I can't really blame Asahina-san for looking so confused after being dragged to the club room so suddenly.

"Hurry up and change!"

I took her uniform hanging on the clothes rack and shoved it into her hands,

"Do it in three minutes, quickly!"

I don't know whether it's the tone of my voice or the terrifying look on my face, Asahina-san trembled as she nodded her head, but she made no sign of taking off her costume at all. Dammit! I might as well take it off for you! Just as I decided to do it anyway, her little white hand pointed towards the door.

"Um…"

"What now!?"

"Can you please go outside first?"

I spun out of the room in less than a second and began to look at my watch as I leaned against the closed door. The time was now 12 minutes 33 seconds.

“Asahina-san, are you done yet!?”

“…N-Not yet!”

It’s just that I was already anxious enough trying to make sure Haruhi wasn’t chasing along. There was no time for me to daydream about the sound being made by the articles of clothing rubbing against each other.

“Asahina-san!”

“Just a little longer…”

It was now past 4:14 PM, I can’t wait any longer! I quickly barged into the room.

“Wah! Kyon-kun! I’m not, wah, kyaa!”

Asahina-san’s eyes widened as she stood stiffly with her hand placed on the zip of her sailor uniform. The white kimono shirt and red hakama on the floor was proof that she had been changing, but now’s not the time for tidying up.

I placed my hands on her shoulders and pushed her towards the broom locker.

“WAH! K, Kyon-kun!”

I was at fault for ignoring Asahina-san’s yell as I pushed her. Her legs tripped and as a result, I ended up falling on top of her.

“Wah! No, don’t…”

Just what the hell was I doing? I had no time to enjoy seeing her look vulnerable. I quickly picked up Asahina-san in her sailor uniform, loudly opened the stainless steel door of the broom locker, and promptly shoved her inside.

“Asahina-san, listen carefully. Please travel at once to eight days ago from this time! Don’t ask anymore, just do it!”

Still feeling shell-shocked, she said teary-eyed,

“…But, I still haven’t received authorization…”

“Please! There’s no time!”

“Eight days ago, is it? What time?”

Damn it! Hurry up and remember! Just what time was it then? What did Asahina-san say to me that time? “You told me to return here at exactly…”

“3:45 PM! Hurry up and go!”

“O-Okay… huh?”

Like a little animal, Asahina-san looked innocently at me. Her eyes then widened as she placed her hand on her head,

“The authorization came even before I even applied. Time coordinates… eight days ago, February 7th, 3:45PM… Right here? Huh? Top Priority Clearance…?”

“You’ll understand when you get there, I should be there waiting for you. My past self will take care of everything from here onwards, remember to say ‘hi’ to him for me,”

It was less than ten seconds to 4:15PM.

I nodded to a terrified looking Asahina-san, and gently closed the door to the broom locker. Within the stainless steel locker, I could not hear anything from within.

As the saying goes, what goes around comes around, karma comes back to haunt what one has done, I have never felt about this so strongly before now. The reason I’m catching my breath now was all because on the day before yesterday, I had set Asahina-san’s return coordinates at 4:16PM. At that time, I never thought it would be so nerve wracking, but in the end it’s all my fault.

“Asahina-san?”

I tried speaking through the stainless steel door, there was no response. I knew it was a waste of time as well. Besides, I didn’t give any warnings to my past self eight days ago, since I never heard of any warnings myself, and Asahina-san said nothing about it. Even if I wanted to, there was no time.

The watch now showed the time to be three seconds past 4:15 PM.

It was extraordinarily quiet. Besides myself, the only sound that can be heard in the empty club room was the breeze and the sound of the crowd outside, haven’t they dispersed yet?

I stood in front of the broom locker and waited quietly.

“Klunk!”

I don’t know how else to describe this - a strange sound emanated from inside the broom locker.

I knew there was someone inside even without listening to the sound of their breathing. It was exactly 4:16 PM, the stainless steel locker suddenly felt like an antique piece of furniture to me for some reason.

I opened the door and spoke the line that I prepared to welcome her back,

“Welcome back, Asahina-san,”

Wearing the large coat Tsuruya-san lent her, it had been 48 hours since I last saw this Asahina-san.

“Ah… um…”

Asahina-san blushed and lowered her head, and then slowly lifted it again. With trepidation, she slowly moved her crystal clear eyes upwards and finally stopped when they met my eyes.

A while later, a smile appeared on her face. Her pink lips blossomed like a cottonrose hibiscus as she spoke the following words,

“I’m back.”

It would have been great if I could continue to spend time alone with Asahina-san like that, but the circumstances simply would not permit me to do such a thing. I’d better get her to change out of that casual wear, but there was still no sight of the uniform that Tsuruya-san had promised to bring.

Looks like she’ll just have to wear the miko costume again for now, and once again, I stepped outside of the club room and leaned against the door.

By the way, it’s strange that Haruhi didn’t come to ask for my head. While it was good that everything was going fine, it’s worrying that it can sometimes be too fine for comfort. At the same time, along came a person carrying a paper bag, if she had arrived earlier, I wouldn’t have had to go through so much trouble.

“Hey! Sorry, Kyon-kun, here, Mikuru’s uniform and indoor shoes. I had wanted to give them to you during lunch, but I forgot,”

Tsuruya-san stepped closer to me,

“What’s going on? I see Haru-nyan up to something in the courtyard, and where’s Mikuru?”

Tsuruya-san smiled meaningfully when I silently pointed to the club room door, and proceeded to turn the door knob as though opening her own refrigerator door.

“Oh, Mikuru. Are you changing? Oh… that’s just excellent, you can take these clothes back home,”

She then turned to wink at me, and then walked inside. Though I could only squat outside in the corridor and stare at the wall, it’s not hard to imagine the surprised look on Asahina-san’s face, since I’ve seen that look many times already.

“Let me help you! Getting changed~ Huh? You’re cosplaying as a miko today?”

I leaned against the wall and heard Asahina-san’s confused-sounding yelps and Tsuruya-san’s child-like laughter. Tsuruya-san probably never gave a thought as to why Asahina-san would take off clothes of a younger twin sister she’s not supposed to have met before. We both knew it was pointless trying to explain further, yet the wonderful thing about Tsuruya-san is that she never seems to mind. Looks like I won’t be able to look at her without feeling inferior for the rest of my life.

As I began to smile wryly, Haruhi triumphantly returned, bringing Nagato and Koizumi, who was carrying the long table. She strutted in such a boastful way, tapping the floor tiles loudly as she stepped and shaking that money can in a loud and ridiculous manner. If she were on a fishing boat, she would probably be brandishing her flag to show off what a catch she’d made today.

“Why’d you suddenly take Mikuru-chan away? We were booed badly, you know?”

I was afraid she would catch a cold from wearing so few clothes. Besides, we’re giving these guys a good bargain. Just for seeing Asahina-san in that costume, we should charge them an extra 500 yen!

“Yes, you’re right! We should’ve charged more. These occasions are hard to come by, after all,”

Haruhi actually agreed to what I said without hesitation, has she already come up with a new activity?

“But Kyon, I sure was surprised. Yuki actually offered to give everyone a consolation prize,”

Haruhi patted her hand on Nagato’s slim back,

“You know those bargain chocolate packets? The ones with the chocolate brand names on them. Yuki personally went and gave one each to every person who didn’t win! I never thought she would prepare such a thing, good job Yuki! You sure thought it out well. This is a brilliant idea, this way no matter what contest we hold, people can always expect a generous consolation prize even if they don’t win!”

They’re probably only going to be looking forward to Nagato personally giving them a prize, I thought to myself. Before thanking her for thinking quickly on the spot, I should first of all thank her for buying time for me.

"…"

Nagato slowly turned around, as though in a hurry to rush back to the club room and bury herself into her book. Only I could understand the expression she's made.

At this moment, the club room door opened suddenly.

"Oh, Tsuruya-san, you're here? What's with those clothes?"

"Hey, Haru-nyan! I've lent these to Mikuru, I'm just coming to take them back, so don't worry about me taking her away from you!"

Tsuruya-san placed the long coat over her shoulders and stuffed the rest of the clothes into her paper bag, while spinning a shoe on the tip of her finger,

"See ya later, Haru-nyan!"

"Okay, see you tomorrow, Tsuruya-san!"

After clapping their hands together, Tsuruya-san disappeared at the end of the corridor. It was as though the stuff concerning Asahina-san and what she told me this lunch time never happened, she was still the same person as before. Not even I could act like her, she is just that amazing. The Tsuruya clan would definitely prosper with her in charge.

"…"

Nagato drifted into the club room, randomly took a book down from the bookshelf, and like water flowing in a stream, elegantly settled on a steel chair and began to indulge in the world of her book.

Haruhi stood by the side as she watched Koizumi and me carry the long table back inside, by which time she had noticed Asahina-san in her miko costume for some time. She said,

"Mikuru-chan! We've amassed a great amount of funds today, so you'd better buy the best tea leaves as celebration! This is all thanks to you. For this achievement, I'm officially promoting you to Deputy Vice Commander! There's no need to be shy, Mikuru-chan, show some happiness!"

Seeing how Haruhi was feeling so pleased with herself while sitting on the commander's desk, I picked the chair furthest away and laid exhausted on the long table.

I am truly worn out. Now I finally understand how exhausting it is to tamper with time, trying to make sure that the effects line up with the causes. Even if I wanted to blame someone, I only have myself to blame. The arrow would still circle 360 degrees back to myself. Is the work of all future time-travelers as stressful as this? Looks like I'm going to have to be careful when talking

with Asahina-san, otherwise I'll place a heavy psychological burden on her shoulders, and she'll probably roll up into a ball like an armadillo whenever she gets jabbed.

"I don't mind sharing some of that burden, cleaning up the mess is my forte, after all,"

Koizumi said to me in a volume in which only I could hear, while opening the wrapping of the box of a card game,

"I'm beginning to understand a bit concerning Suzumiya-san's plan,"

I lifted my head and found myself exchanging glances with Koizumi, who was studying his deck of cards with a grin. "I wonder which hair style suits you best?" said Haruhi while sitting Asahina-san on a chair and playing around with her hair. At the mercy of Haruhi, Asahina-san shut her eyes tightly like a cat whose hair was being brushed. I watched this scene play out as I said,

"Didn't you say there was nothing unusual about Haruhi's behavior?"

"That was what I meant, as treasure hunting and mystery searching are part of Suzumiya-san's regular activities. Maybe I should've said she's deliberately pretending as though nothing unusual is happening? Who would have thought that you would have completely forgotten about Valentine's Day? It's not just Suzumiya-san, I'm sure no one would forget. For guys like us, this is a day that we would at least pay some attention to even if we're not confident of receiving any chocolates. Of course Suzumiya-san would have thought you would be anxious about it, that was why she pretended nothing was happening. Having two consecutive days of mystery searches was a clear indication of her plan to drive you crazy about whether you would receive any chocolates on that day."

Then wouldn't it be better if she could just directly put the chocolates in my shoe locker? That locker isn't reserved for time travelers, you know!?

"Suzumiya-san is just the sort of person that likes to take such a convoluted route. If she had directly given them to you, she would have found it too boring. Besides, we worked very hard to dig out those treasures, so it was quite rewarding when we found them."

Koizumi seems to be examining his cards as he continuously organizes them into various rows and columns.

"I sure had a lot of fun, didn't you?"

What's that supposed to mean? Is that a loaded question?

Just as I was about to make a witty response…

"Hey, Kyon! Koizumi-kun! Whispering time's over!"

The loud exclamation had Asahina-san waking up in surprise from her daydreams as well as catching the attention of Koizumi and I. Haruhi released her hands from Asahina-san's hair, which was tied into a bundle…

"Now, on to the main agenda!"

She then smacked the white board,

"Listen carefully, especially Kyon and Koizumi-kun!"

Haruhi gave the smile of a strategist and talked to us like a cram school teacher teaching her honest yet dim-witted students,

"We'll begin with the planned activities for March!"

I glanced at the calendar for next month and said,

"For Hinamatsuri??"

Haruhi went speechless for a while,

"…Ah yes, that one as well,"

I'm amazed you forgot.

"Of course I remembered! It's only through refreshing one's memories that one can discover new revelations, so there's no way I'd forget. March 3rd, huh? Right, we can toss rice cake offerings from the top floor corridor!"

Now that's the first time I've heard of such a silly activity for Hinamatsuri.

"Let's leave that aside for now, aren't you forgetting another bigger festival in March?"

Haruhi's smile is as the stars from the center of the Milky Way shining through the powerful lens of a super-telescope.

"Today I specifically want Kyon and Koizumi-kun to think on what they'll have to prepare for that day!"

So what are you trying to say then?

"I'm talking about White Day! On March 14th, when a guy receives an obligation chocolate or whatever confectioneries on Valentine's Day, they'll have to repay the favor by thirty times!"

She's like a wild stallion running blindly with blinkers on, why must Haruhi choose the moment when everything is going right for her to get back to normal!? Returning thirty times the favor was probably calculated using Haruhi's inflation rate.

"Yuki, Mikuru-chan, you can now ask for whatever you want! These two will do everything to get it for you!"

She pointed at me and Koizumi,

"They'll get anything you want! Crane Maidens repaying their kindness are out of fashion, in this day and age people should offer things that are thousands of times more valuable than cloth!" (Story of the Crane Maiden)

Haruhi then smiled pridefully,

"Just as reference, let me give you an idea of the stuff that I want. Though I still haven't decided which one to get exactly, so I'll announce that in a few days time! I won't purposely ask for something that'll be impossible for you to obtain within a month's time, so don't you worry!"

Haruhi spoke without reservations, just like how Kaguya-Hime comes up with ridiculously impossible tasks for the suitors who had came to ask for her hand in marriage. While hoping she isn't going to be asking for non-existent stuff like "Authentic Artifacts of Yamataikoku" or the "Elixir of Life from Horaijima", I said to Haruhi,

"Just so you know, we may take into account the amount of effort we'll spend on finding your treasure,"

By the time I realize my retort may backfire, it was already too late.

"No problem!"

Haruhi's eyes glittered brightly, totally eclipsing the brilliance of the entire Pleiades constellation.

"That's the attitude I want! As long as it's anything that I want, I will get it even if I have to go all the way to Mars! Isn't that right, Yuki, Mikuru-chan?"

Seeing Asahina-san looking awkward and Nagato nodding her head while keeping her eyes glued to her book, Koizumi and I both shrug our shoulders at the same time, as though it had all been rehearsed before.

Author's Notes

Why is it that one knows not what one will do in the future, nor what one thought of it back then?

Rather than speaking of not knowing, many would say instead that "I have forgotten what I thought about back then." Therefore to make sure that you won't forget, you should make notes. Although there will be times when you won't even remember what such records mean. For example…

…before I started the epilogue, I dug into my previous records and there are many ambiguities in what I recorded. I can't help but think, "why is it that I just don't understand the things I did?" It should not be on account of changes in my way of thinking, but rather I must have picked up some strange, enigmatic transmissions back there and then subconsciously jotted them down in my note." "Myth of millions strands of "Beni shoga" and "Medley of Pavlov" are things that puzzle me every time when I try to make sense of their meanings. Why is it that I would write such things down?

I must have thought this: "As long as I write them down, I should be able to immediately remember these things when reading through them the next time." I guess I was full of confidence in my memorization skills back in those days. Whereas today I have absolutely no clue about the tiniest bit of the original questions. At any rate, they must have been some meaningless trivialities. However if they were something interesting, I would be quite furious over losing out to myself of the past (?some part of my past? - sounds better and keeps more in tone with Ch07).

A lesson to learn here is that one must document ideas carefully when taking notes. Although another lesson is that you might still have no idea what you jotted down…

This novel is the longest in the entire series.

Since *Disappearance*, the stories in the novel have been set during winter, and finally winter ends here and now. After this I will be penning the tales from the following spring. Though I might mention that my favorite season is early summer, because in this time you can hear the idling frogs and the busy singing of birds, their sounds mixing in a duet. By then, you'll be away from the cold for a good long while. How nice is that! Even the trip to the convenience store at night is not nearly as painful an affair.

Let's leave it at that. Because of your endless support I am able to continue to write these stories. As I am writing these words down and looking back, it suddenly hits me that I have actually finished so many novels, and will have more to come. Needless to say, I am part surprised and part concerned. I wonder what everyone has to say about it after reading all of this?

Thank you all once again, and please keep supporting me if you like my stories.

With that, see you all.

—Tanigawa Nagaru

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We would like to thank these users for contributing portions of translated script:

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